

The Parable of the Sheep and Goats ...

... 'Grace' breaks through the 'Medicine-line'

A sermon given on the Feast of Christ the King, the Sunday before Advent, 22nd November 2020, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Online Communion Service.

Matthew 25:31-End

I wonder whether you ever think of Beverly Minster as a hotbed of revolution. Is this a place where you expect things to be turned upside down, where people question everything and where the future is imagined as being very different from the present? Probably not. The great age of the minster, and its imposing grandeur is more likely to speak of stability, continuity and the accepted order of things. Well, what about when you walk past the Magistrates Court or the Crown Court? Do you think, "This is a place where the poor find justice, where the humble are lifted up, where the tables are turned on the rich and the powerful"? Probably not. Whilst we might have the utmost respect for the law and value the need to keep order and restrain wrongdoing, we may not automatically see the courts as places of revolution, where the humblest asylum seeker can be heard on an equal footing with the great and the good.

So when we read parables like the one in this morning's gospel, which speak of Jesus as judge sitting on the throne of his glory with all the nations gathered before him and separating people from one another like sheep being separated from goats - we may not immediately understand what's really going on. We might think that God is as concerned as we are with keeping up good order; that God's justice is about maintaining the status quo; keeping troublemakers off the streets; allowing decent people to go about their business undisturbed; ensuring that nobody asks any awkward questions about the deep inequalities and divisions that scar our world. Many people assume that's what God wants and that religion is part of a structure intended to keep everyone in their place.

Whereas the parable makes it pretty clear that, Jesus, the judge wants to turn things upside down. A passage like this needs to be read alongside all those parts of the Bible that speak of the hungry being filled and the rich being sent empty away; of the poor being blessed; of the humble being exalted and the mighty being put down from out of their thrones; of the last being first and of sinners entering the kingdom of God ahead of the scribes and the Pharisees.

The Bible assumes that the existing order is basically unfair and that God's order will overturn it. The gospel is about revolution. Part of our problem is that we are so used to the way things are, we've become desensitised to the unfairness of the world: we've learned to accept it, and we no longer get angry about the inequalities or trying to challenge the injustices. As long as we're comfortable, it's all too easy to turn a blind eye to everything that's wrong for those who are less fortunate than we are.

Sometimes people read this parable as saying that in order to earn salvation, you have to be a bit like Mother Teresa and that caring for the sick and the poor will get you into heaven. But I don't think it's quite like that, not least because the rest of the New Testament is so obviously saying that God is the God of Grace, who loves us and forgives us and welcomes us, simply because that's what he's like. So that salvation has nothing to do with what we're like or how good we are. It's just that God can't help himself, cost him what it will. And if you listen to the parable carefully, you realise the surprising thing about it is not what it says about us, but what it says about Jesus. "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" he says. In other words, Jesus is present not so much on the courtroom throne, wrapped up in judge's robes and a wig and safely removed from any unpleasantness. Jesus is present, rather, in the faces of people who are hungry or naked or sick or in prison, or who are simply strangers, unknown and different. In such people, we meet Christ. And when we turn away from them, we turn away from Christ. When we allow them to become invisible, Christ becomes invisible.

In the parable, the righteous have not actually recognised Jesus. They have not seen him in the faces of the stranger or the captive, or at least not knowingly. But they have treated those people as if Christ was there. And what the righteous have got right is that they have refused to divide the world up into 'us and them'; they have resisted the temptation to mix only with their own sort; they have not allowed inequality to cut them off from those who are less fortunate. For the righteous, it is not Christ who is invisible, it is the boundaries and fences and compartments which divide up our minds and stop us from seeing a human being in need as a brother or sister.

In the old Wild West, there was the idea of the 'medicine line'. When the surveyors first measured out the frontier between Canada and the United States, they marked it with little cairns. And when the Native Americans asked them what they were doing, they said they were making medicine for Queen Victoria, the great mother across the ocean. And the Indians at first were not at all impressed: little piles of stones didn't look like powerful

medicine at all. But when they went raiding the next spring, they made an amazing discovery. They found that when the sheriff and his men chased them, the posse stopped up short at the piles of stones and couldn't pass. For the life of them, those Indians couldn't see what was stopping the lawmen. So they could only conclude that the great mother across the ocean did indeed have powerful medicine. And we live with so many 'medicine lines' in our heads: fences separating us from our fellow human beings based on race or colour or accent or money or just what kind of music you listen to. Often we have medicine lines of fear, penning us in and stopping us from discovering the continent of risk and danger, and generosity and justice, which are only a step away.

Jesus is the humble man who has been exalted. God's revolution has taken the one who was humble in the face of death, and made him the one before whom every knee shall bow. His grace breaks through the medicine line, reaching out even to such as to you and me, so that we in turn may glorify him and find our freedom, as we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, and visit the prisoner.

Let's pray for courage and grace to reach out across the many inequalities and divisions of this world, because in so doing, we are not only acting out the judgment of God, we also never know whom we are really going to meet.

Reading Text

Matthew 25:31-End

³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."