

Sermon on Sunday 26 November

by Melanie Seward, Lay Reader

Christ the King

(Readings: Ephesians 1. 15-end & Matthew 25. 31-end)



Meeting the Shepherd

Music has the power to get inside our heads. For me, it has been the riff from Red Eyes, the War on Drugs track; I find myself cooking, sweeping up leaves and walking to the rhythm!

I wonder if you have experienced an 'earworm'. Earworms are not unusual for me but, whilst preparing this sermon, I have had a parable worm. The Sheep and the Goats. It kept surfacing in my mind, not deliberately recalled but as an involuntary association. Such as when I was absentmindedly walking past the foodbank and from a pile of papers fell a refugee appeal. Or when I felt a twinge after I decided that I was never going to read the copy of The Big Issue, yet while eating supper on my knee, TV

presenter Simon Reeve was in Cornwall and had met a lady working at a foodbank who immediately broke off the conversation when a man arrived who needed a tent. Sometimes we hear or read scripture and we feel its power to reach deep into us.

I guess the story stuck with Jesus' listeners in Palestine where in the day, the sheep and the goats grazed the pasture together whilst at night, the sticking up tailed goats needed to be separated from the sheep because they needed a warmer spot (goats feel the cold more than the hardier sheep). They understood the biblical imagery of the divine shepherd - caring and guiding his people who would gather them up and take them into the fold. And they would have been familiar with what is the Jewish list of good works with visiting prisoners being an addition.

Furthermore, scholars have noted that there are similar stories elsewhere but, with Jesus, there are significant differences.

The parable is exhorting us to care for those in need - the hungry and thirsty, strangers, those without the basic material necessities such as warm clothing, those who are sick or in prison but, Jesus adds 'whatever you do for the least of these'. Jesus is talking about caring for those who are not just our family, friends, congregation, neighbours, those who look and speak like us, those who we find it easy to help and those we expect to meet - he says we must care for the least of these who suffer neglect and vulnerability. More than this, the implication that in doing so, we encounter Jesus.

Who might these people in need be? Some Christians interpret this parable as Jesus talking to his disciples about taking care of their Christian brothers. The parable is understood as teaching people within the church that they should care for all individuals who come among them. However, we must remember that Jesus as the shepherd sits enthroned to judge all nations in this way. Bibles may use the word 'brother' when translating verse 40 or use 'members of my family'. Both can mean all humanity. 'Brother' and 'the family of Jesus' embrace all human beings - Jesus dies for everyone not a select club.

Everyone embraces anyone. Someone in Hertford who is hungry and someone in Darfur in Sudan. A stranger at the train station who needs a hot drink and strangers across the world who have no access to clean water. Prisoners across the world who cannot leave where they live to work to go to school or the hospital or to see their families and, those who are confined in a cell without meaningful stimulation or mental health care.

Why do it? The justification for inaction - that there are too many people in need, that we cannot help everyone or that what I do will not make any difference to how the world is now - is heard from all kinds of people in all places. They mean nothing to those in need and 'the least of all' perhaps are not even aware of the arguments made. The hunger still gnaws, the stranger waits to be welcomed, the least wait to be valued. A hungry person who can eat, a stranger welcomed knows a difference has been made.

Imagine if Jesus had decided that there were just too many people to save; foreseeing persecution and a very nasty crucifixion, he calculated that humanity would have to

wait; even though millions needed saving, forgiving, reconciling to God and the entire world needed redeeming and to be transformed. Jesus decided to serve others.

Today is the festival of Christ the King, created after the advent of the first world war and the rise of nationalism and dictatorships, to highlight the model of Christ, as King of the Creation, whose just and gentle rule is supreme. Jesus contrasts with much of what we see as leadership by exemplifying a life of service. Jesus calls us to a life of service; in all our different walks of life, to trust and act in service to him and others. Our allegiance is to a spiritual ruler in heaven.

So, there we are - it is a straightforward idea that I embrace, practice, and yet, this parable left me feeling guilty every time I realised that I could have helped and didn't. And what about the eternal punishment, let alone that it is a result of the sins of omission rather than deliberate sins.

Before this reading, Matthew places a picture of a Judge who is the divine Shepherd who lays down his life for our well-being and future. It is Jesus who wants more than anything for us to accept his love and guidance, lean on his strength and experience the breath of God. Next, remember the righteous are not rewarded for their good deeds, rather their good deeds are the way that Jesus recognises them as being part of his kingdom. Those who reach out and care are surprised that the Shepherd was present.

Faith changes our heart and translates into living. Caring for those suffering and afflicted is part and parcel of living the Christian Way. Like other parables, on first reading this seems to be about how we will account for ourselves at a future and, what can seem a distant, final judgement when, first and foremost, it is about our lives in the present. So, mental note to myself: pray and work with Jesus to try to live in the present and make a difference in the situations I meet, where he will be.