

Matthew 25:31-46

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. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34Then 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; 35for 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, 36I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." 37Then 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? 38And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" 40And 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." 41Then 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; 42for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43I 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." 44Then 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?" 45Then 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." 46And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

The idea of judgement is one that in much of the Church seems to have been laid aside. The loving grace of God is emphasised and since we live in a society that proclaims an "all inclusive" ideal it is not far from an all inclusive anything goes image of God.

Yet judgement is a frequent theme in the Scriptures, Old and New Testament.

Here in this passage we see Jesus using an everyday image of a shepherd separating the less hardy goats from the combined flock of sheep and goats as an illustration of a coming judgement that will include separation.

On a practical note do you know how to tell sheep from goats? In our country it is normally fairly obvious but around the world they can look very similar. The difference is with the tail; a goat has a tail that sticks up and sheep a tail that hangs down.

There are questions raised in this illustration Jesus used for possible pondering if we read it very closely and treat it like an allegory, which I do not believe it to be. One is "Who is a member of the family that the King speaks about?" (v40) Is the family the disciples of Jesus or is family the whole of humanity or some other grouping?

How that family term is taken can affect whom we see we are called to help in society. If we see the family as just the followers of Jesus does that mean we are a "look after your own" club?

I cannot know what was in the mind of Jesus at the time but at the heart of his message was a care for the weak and vulnerable, the poor and the outcasts, the sick and the lame, the tax collectors and prostitutes which goes against the look after your own image.

When I was in college I heard a sermon that spoke of where we find Jesus. The preacher spoke of Jesus saying of two places where he can be found, where two or three are gathered together in his name and in this story – whatever you do the least you do unto me.

Jesus is present in the presence of suffering and need. The challenge issued to us was to get to know Jesus so well that we can recognise his presence and so help others discover his presence for themselves.

Ultimately the message is that the King will be judge, not you and I. As his disciples we are called to care for the needs of those who are suffering in anyway in our world and help them find Jesus.