



Sermon: - 26th November 2017

The sheep and the goats

Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25: 31-46

What an amazing week it has been in Zimbabwe. Robert Mugabe, at the age of 93, has finally been forced to resign after what can only be described as a reign, although he was a president and not a king. His leadership of decades has been controversial and divisive. He has been accused of being a dictator responsible for economic mismanagement, widespread corruption, racial discrimination, human rights abuses, suppression of political critics and crimes against humanity. And now he has gone, and the country has the opportunity for a fresh start. Leadership is a big issue in Zimbabwe.

Leadership is a big issue here too. I recently read an article written by an American journalist suggesting that Britain has lost its role as a world leader and has been reduced to a laughing stock as our leaders fail to deal with the issues presented by Brexit. Somewhat controversially, he suggested that part of the problem is that our political parties, over the last several years, have become more concerned with furthering their own interests than in acting in the best interests of the country. He suggested that there is a significant lack of real leadership in the country at the moment. All over the world at the moment it would seem that leadership is an issue.

Today is the Sunday when we celebrate Christ the King; our passages consider the Kingdom of Christ and the nature of that kingdom. Therefore, they also tell us something about what kind of leader Jesus is, and what kind of Kingdom he rules over.

A couple of years back I attended a course on Leadership. What makes a good leader? Why do people resent one leader while passionately following another to the ends of the earth? Why do some leaders inspire loyalty, commitment and achievement, while others create an atmosphere of resentment and mistrust leading to demotivation? According to the presenter on my course it all comes down to leadership style and the best leaders are heart centred leaders.

Heart centred leaders inspire their followers. They inspire in their followers loyalty and commitment. Their leadership style creates an environment where people feel valued and motivated.

Heart centred leaders display:

Integrity, compassion, kindness and respect.

They are appreciative and express gratitude.

They aim to make a difference

They choose to act for the greater good of the organisation rather than their own benefit.

They are authentic and you know that they can be trusted.

They connect with others and take time to build relationships with those for whom they are responsible.

These are the leaders who inspire and engender trust and loyalty. Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr, ... and above and beyond all..... Jesus

Jesus, it seems to me, was indeed a heart centred leader. His aim is to have his kingdom reflect his values and his values centre on people, not power, need not status, and love not ambition; authority tempered by humility. So what kind of company will Christ lead? What kind of Kingdom will he reign over?

It's not always easy to tell the difference between sheep and goats, especially in the Middle East where the varieties of sheep look very similar to goats. In the same way we might find it difficult to distinguish between people who are sheep and people who are goats. Jesus points out that the difference is one of motivation. It is clear from the passage that those represented by the sheep were not caring for the hungry, the sick, the naked and the prisoner because they thought they were caring for Christ, they cared for the hungry, the sick, the naked and the prisoner because these were people in need. They saw those in need as people worthy of respect and love and compassion. People who, because of their humanity, were deserving of care. Those whom Jesus put on his right hand were followers of Christ in that they displayed his values in their treatment of others. They had compassion, integrity and respect for others. They aimed to make a difference and connect with others. What's more, they did it for the sake of those they were helping, and not in expectation of a reward.

Martin of Tours was born in the early part of the year 300, and became a Christian at the age of 10. As his father was an officer in the Roman army Martin was expected to follow in his father's footsteps. While he was a soldier he was stationed in Gaul, which we call France. One day as he was approaching the gates of the city of Amiens, he met a scantily clad beggar. He impulsively cut his military cloak in half to share with the man. That night, he experienced a vision. Martin dreamed of Jesus wearing the half-cloak he had given away. He heard Jesus say to the angels: "Martin, clothed me with this robe. Christ's kingdom, the kingdom of heaven will be full of people who care about people. They are motivated, not by power, but by grace.

And the goats? The people represented by the goats seem not to care about people. Who knows what they were thinking when they passed by on the other side, but their lack of common humanity is what bars them from entering the Kingdom of God. They may have kept the commandments. They may have exercised strict discipline over times for prayer and worship. But in the end, they failed because they did not see the poor on their doorstep. They were unaware of the hungry on their street corners, and left the prisoner to languish in confinement as just punishment for misdeeds. In other words, they lacked compassion and the Kingdom of God is made up of people who have the humility, and the humanity, to care.

But there is another important implication in this passage which has significance for us. The sheep were not aware that they had done anything of worth, anything of note, or anything to gain them a reward. The goats, on the other hand, expected that they would be rewarded but in the end, they found that the kingdom of God is about much more than just following the rules and regulations of worship. It is not about being good religious people. The implication of this parable is that the goats expected to be rewarded and were disappointed.

So why is that? Why did they expect to be included? Can you hear the surprise in their voices? "But, Lord, when did we see you hungry and thirsty? When did we neglect and ignore you?" They were sure, and convinced, that they had not neglected their duty, but here they are being told that that was just what they had done. They were surprised to be excluded.

On the other hand, the sheep were surprised to be included. "Lord when did we see you hungry and thirsty? When did we help and succour you?" They were only doing what they thought was right. They had no thought that they were earning themselves a place in heaven.

And so, in the surprise of these two groups, the delighted surprise of the sheep, and the disappointed surprise of the goats, we get another clue as to the nature of this kingdom. It will be full of people who are surprised to be there.

The sheep were doing what they thought was right, and were surprised to find that in the doing, they were worshipping God and were bringing into being the kingdom of Christ. They were worshipping Christ, although they did not know it.

The goats were doing what they thought was right and were surprised to find that they were not worshipping God and building the kingdom of Christ. They were not worshipping Christ, although they thought they were.

If the goats are religious people, and the sheep are irreligious people, what does that tell us about the nature of Christ's kingdom?

That it is not being religious that gets us there. That it is not worshipping faithfully alone that gets us there. That, in the words of the Apostle James, faith without works is dead. But perhaps works, done in pureness of heart, in faith that people need to be loved, are accepted by Jesus as worship and become a passport to the kingdom of God. The kingdom of Christ, then, is full of people who care, people who in some sense have the right to be there because of the quality of their compassion and not the correctness of their doctrine. People who will be surprised to find that they have a right to be there. Perhaps, people who we might be surprised to see there.

So what does that mean for us, those of us who come Sunday by Sunday to worship God through ritual and liturgy? Does it mean that this religious observance is wrong? No. After all, the first commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind and with all your strength. But it's not enough. Does it mean that we are saved by works, Again, no. But the second commandment is to love your neighbour as yourself. And this parable today tells us that in loving our neighbour, we are in fact loving God. Worship without love is arid and barren and will not build Christ's kingdom. Love for God is displayed in love for neighbour, and so those who love their neighbour, are worshipping God whether they know it or not.

Christ's Kingdom is about love and compassion for all. It's about the humility of care alongside the glory of worship. It's about putting ourselves and selfish desires aside for the good of others. All are worthy of concern, all are worthy of love, and in loving others whoever they are, wherever we find them, in whatever way we can, we build the kingdom of Christ, here on earth.