

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17; Ps 23; 1 Cor 15:20-26, 28; Matthew 25:31-46

Christ the King

Matt 25:31 “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.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This parable, found only in Matthew, needs quite careful handling. As we saw recently, it belongs to a pattern of parables in this part of Matthew. (See box below. Mk = Mark; Q = the Sayings Source; M = Matthew’s special material).

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

In the OT, a Day of the Lord is expected when he will intervene to

Thought for the day

“King” is a foundational metaphor in the Bible, which in ordinary usage suggests power and glory. But even in the ancient biblical tradition, there are two great modifications. According to an Old Testament vision, a king is meant to be a shepherd to his people, a true shepherd who cares for and who knows and even loves his sheep. According to a New Testament vision, Jesus our king rules paradoxically by loving service, humility and the gift of himself. This example and teaching of Jesus has lost none of its power today.

Prayer

Wake us up, O God, and rouse us from the slumber of the everyday that we may recognise you in every moment and in every person each day of our lives.

punish the wicked and deliver that faithful and thus establish his own rule (Is 13:6, 9; 58:13; Jer 46:10; Ezek 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14; Amos 5:18, 20; Obad 1:15; Zeph 1:7, 14; Mal 4:5). Sometimes a shorter expression is used, but the meaning is the same (e.g., “on that day,” Zeph. 1:9-10; Amos 8:9; “the day of the Lord’s sacrifice,” Zeph. 1:8; “the day of the wrath of the Lord,” Ezek. 7:19; cf. Isa. 2:12).

KIND OF WRITING

In form, this is an apocalyptic parable. It rather lacks the enigmatic element of the original Jesus parables and is more didactic, in the manner of Matthew. As the decoding shows, the parable is treated allegorically.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

There are two interpretations of this parable. The traditional interpretation, which probably

Verses	Contents	Source
24: 1-44	following Mk 13, + additions and changes	Mk/Q/M
24: 45-25:30	parables of delay (Steward, Virgins, Talents)	Q/M/Q
25: 31-46	parable of the Last Judgement	M

- The fig tree as a parable of the coming of the Son of Man
- As in the days of Noah
- As when a burglar comes
- As with a faithful servant when his master returns
- As with bridesmaids awaiting the bridegroom
- As with talents given to servants to work with
- As with sheep and goats separated by the shepherd

cannot be set aside, is that anyone who is kind to someone in need will be judged favourably. This is the “universalist” interpretation. There is another, usually called the “particularist” interpretation. According to this view, what Matthew has in mind is the narrow question of what will happen to good non-believers who have come to the help of believers in distress. This perhaps surprising reading depends on a number of observations about Matthew’s vocabulary and theology. It can be laid out in the following steps.

Who is gathered for judgement? In Matthew’s text, “all the nations” never refers to Christians or even Christians and non-Christians together (see Matt 24:9, 14; 25:32; 28:19). There was a later Jewish tradition that there would be a separate judgement for non-believers (see Testament of Benjamin 10:8-9; 4 Ezra 13:33-50 1 Enoch 90-91).

Who are the least of my brethren (“members of my family” in the NRSV)? First of all, “one of these little ones” always refers to disciples in Matthew (Matt 10:42; 18:6, 10, 14). The expression “least of my brethren” takes up the idea of “little” and adds the technical term for a member of the Christian community, adelphoi, meaning brothers and sisters. In Matthew’s Gospel, adelphos always means a literal family member or else a disciple.

In another passage, similar language seems to point to the service of the disciples by non-believers:

Matt. 10:40 “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 41 Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; 42 and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Bearing all this in mind, contrary to the traditional reading of this parable, the issue at stake here is not

“how will anyone who is kind be saved” but rather “what will happen to those non-believers who have come to the help of disciples”. The first question is really a modern one. The second question may reflect more accurately conditions in the first century. For example, no food was provided for people in prison as they awaited trial. Christians were imprisoned, as we know (1Cor 4:11-13; 2Cor 6:4-5; 11:25-27; 3Jn 5-7), they would have depended upon charitable non-believers to help them. The teaching of the parable, therefore, would seem to be this: Christians, in their vulnerability, enable non-believers to encounter Christ, because “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” There is a deep message for disciples today and the church: salvation is made available not by power or benevolence but by weakness and vulnerability. Such a teaching echoes the experience of St Paul, as we see in the next section.

ST PAUL

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.” So then, each of us will be accountable to God. (Romans 14:10–12)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Broadly speaking, the remarks made above set the ground for reading the parable, so that no detailed comment is necessary. Perhaps it is worth noting that this parable of the Great Assize ends positively, with the just on their way to heaven.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. This judgment scene contains surprises for us. One is that nobody is condemned for doing wrong, but for their failure to do good. Jesus is telling us that being his disciple is a positive choice about how we live and relate to others. Perhaps sin-avoidance has sometimes dominated your view of what was being asked of you. What difference has it made

for you when you viewed your Christian life as a daily opportunity to make a positive difference to others?

2. Another way of saying this is that the aim of Christian living is not me-centred (about my personal sanctification) but other centred (about responding to the needs of others). What happens to you when you get caught up yourself? Is your life not better, and often more enjoyable, when you can look beyond yourself to others?

3. The standard of love and concern that Jesus presents challenges us to look beyond our comfort zone to those who are most in need. Who are those most in need in your world? When have you been able to move beyond your comfort zone in reaching out to them?

4. Another surprise is to hear Jesus tell us that when we do something for another, he considers it as done to himself. When has seeing Christ in others helped you in your dealings with them?

5. The story is about the judgment of the whole of humanity. It presents an ideal of society in which human relationships at all levels are governed by the law of love. In your experience what difference has it made to a group to which you belonged when there was a definite sensitivity to the needs of all members?

PRAYER

Almighty God, you have conferred upon Christ Jesus sovereignty over every age and nation.

Direct us, in the love of Christ, to care for the least of his brothers and sisters, that we may be subject to his dominion and receive the inheritance of your kingdom.

Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out

Ezek 34:11 For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. 12 As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. 13 *I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land.* 14 *I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.* 15 I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. 16 I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

Ezek 34:17 As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

It is obvious from v. 17 why this passage was chosen to match Matthew 25:31-46). Given the long gospel, the lectionary omits vv. 13-14 for reasons of brevity; these are restored here for reflection purposes. In those days, the shepherd was pivotal in the life of the sheep: he found pasture, protected them, lived with them and so forth. The metaphor of shepherding was used throughout the Ancient Near East to speak of kingly rule, and then by extension, to speak of the rule of God. Just as a shepherd is “pivotal” for the well-being of sheep, likewise the king or even God is pivotal in the life of his people.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Ezekiel prophesied and wrote just before and then during the

Babylonian Exile (587-539 bc). Along with other writers, he interprets the Exile as a punishment for infidelity. In particular, Ezekiel—himself a priest—lays the blame for the disaster at the feet of the priests. For that reason, all of ch. 34 is highly critical of the higher clergy. Here is a sample:

The word of the LORD came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.

Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: As I live, says the Lord God, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them. (Ezekiel 34:1-10)

KIND OF WRITING

The passage read in the liturgy is the second part of a prophecy of judgement. It is much more positive and, while it is prose rather than poetry, it exploits to the full and very movingly the metaphor of shepherding: search, seek (v. 11), scattered, rescue (v. 12); shepherd, lie down (v. 15); seek, lost, strayed, bind, injured, strengthen, weak, fat, strong (v. 16); sheep and goats (v. 17). The verses omitted in the lectionary are also rich: bring them out, gather, feed, watercourse (v. 13); feed, good pasture, lie down, grazing land, pasture (v.14).

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

There is the obvious background of the call of David, Psalm 23, Isaiah 40. But even in the book of Genesis we find this language:

He blessed Joseph, and said, “The God before whom my ancestors Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all harm, bless the boys; and in them let my name be perpetuated, and the name of my ancestors Abraham and Isaac; (Genesis 48:15-16)

Yet his bow remained taut, and his arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob, by the name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, by the God of your father, who will help you, by the Almighty who will bless you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lies beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb. (Genesis 49:24-25)

The psalms are especially rich. Here is an example from Psalm 80:

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us! (Psalms 80:1-2)

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 23 is in two parts. The first goes from vv. 1-4 (“Song of the Shepherd”) and the second from vv.

5-6 (“Song of Hospitality”). The imagery of shepherding is beautifully developed here and responds marvellously to the reading from Ezekiel, using much of the same language of pasture etc.

THE GOSPEL LINK

Parable of the Last Judgment uses the language of shepherding and kingly rule, following biblical tradition. Specifically, the shepherding language is found in vv. 32-33. As noted already, it is the last verse of the reading which seems to link most closely with the judgment parable.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 11 I myself is in conscious contrast with the priests, who have not been faithful shepherds. God steps in to look after his own.

Verse 12 The day of clouds and think darkness means the Day of the Lord, which they have experienced in the disaster of the Exile (see Deut 4:11; Joel 2:2; Zeph 1:15, Psalm 97:2).

Verse 13 A beautiful pastoral description, exploiting fully the pastoral metaphor. See 11:17: Therefore say: Thus says the Lord GOD: I will gather you from the peoples, and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel. (Ezekiel 11:17)

Verse 14 The repetitions are for insistence: it is to reassure the exiles that God can and will do this for them.

Verse 15 The emphatic “I myself” returns to close the pronouncement. The occurrence of the word “I” in this and the next verse is very noticeable.

Verse 16 God’s real gift will be justice, that is, he will act rightly according to the covenant bond with Israel. It leads to the role of judgement to be found in the next verse. Destroying the fat and the strong seems odd at this point. It may be due to an error in the Hebrew and it is possible it should read, I will tend them rightly. Otherwise, it has to be taken to refer (awkwardly) to the fat clergy!!

Verse 17 In this final verse in the lectionary, God addresses the flock directly. For them he will administer justice. The assessment in this case does not divide into sheep and goats (because these are equally valuable), but between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. It is God himself who seeks us out, however we are lost. Can I remember and pray over times in my life when I myself felt really lost and needed God’s guidance and help? Prayer of thanksgiving.
2. Reading the past can be illuminating. Sometimes things which seem excellent turn out to be fraught and something things which seem disastrous turn out to be grace. Have I found this in my own life? Prayer of discernment.
3. The care of God is especially evident in this passage. How have I experienced God’s love and care in my own life and in different settings?
4. While the judgment language is difficult for us today, we do still think God has hopes and expectations for us, that we will come to life in abundance. What in my life would now fall under the judgment of God? To what is God calling me at present?

PRAYER

Loving shepherd of the sheep, show yourself once more as our true leader, a guide to us who often stray and are lost. Take us on your shoulder and lead us home rejoicing.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading
Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17

This very moving reading was written at a time of failure and calamity. The religious leadership had failed the people and so God speaks to them directly.

Second reading
1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28

When Paul wrote to the believers in Corinth, they really did believe Jesus was raised from the dead but they couldn’t imagine a resurrection of

the dead for themselves. Paul teaches that all who belong to him will be brought to life in Christ.

Gospel
Matthew 25:31-46

In the familiar parable of the Last Judgement, today’s gospel tries to answer the question: where can the believer encounter Christ in our ordinary everyday life.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Mon 24 Nov *St Andrew, Companions*
Apocalypse 14:1-5

A vision of heaven opens—for those who following the Lamb. The 144k is symbolic (12x12x1000) meaning the whole world.

Tue 25 Nov *St Catherine of Alexandria*
Apocalypse 14:14-19

In this vision, the sufferings of the end of time are read using harvest imagery.

Wednesday 26 November
Apocalypse 15:1-4

In this vision, the victory over evil is accomplished. The hymn quoted was probably used in the regular worship of the hearers.

Thursday 27 November
Apocalypse 18:1-2, 21-23; 19:1-3, 9

Today’s reading is a fantastical mock funeral for the forces of evil, represented by Babylon (= the Roman Empire). It ends positively.

Friday 28 November
Apocalypse 20:1-4, 11-15; 21:1-2

A dramatic vision of the end, with the destruction of evil, illustrated with ancient imagery of Satan, the Abyss and the book of life. Then God will establish the New Jerusalem, presenting her like a bride adorned.

Saturday 29 November
Apocalypse 22:1-7

A marvellous image of the New Jerusalem, without Temple, because God will be our light. The New Testament Apocalypse ends on a resoundingly positive note. The Bible begins in the heavenly garden and it ends in the heavenly city.