

Sermon to St Dionis Sunday 22 November 2015
By Jonathan Aitken
Matthew 25: 31-46

Of all the parables of Jesus, the sheep and the goats story is paradoxically both:

The most awesome

And the most alarming

AWESOME because it is the Gospel's litmus test which defines whether we are really committed to the great commandment "Love your neighbour".

ALARMING because it is the starkest of stark reminders that we are all accountable to God.

AND that each and every one of us will one day have to face His judgement.

Now this is a parable which makes many people feel uncomfortable.

And for that reason, its sombre message is often ignored or at least diluted – even by preachers – who find all manner of excuses as to why it won't apply to us.

These excuse makers tend to argue that life, even spiritual life just isn't like this.

How could a loving God be so judgemental? They ask.

Such doubters particularly don't like the way Jesus ends his story in verse 46 telling us that those who have rejected him, the goats,

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“Will go away to eternal punishment” adding that the righteous will inherit eternal life.

To many people that sounds either too bad or too good to be true.

Such doubts, though wrong, may be understandable. Because we mortals are creatures of the present time. We find it difficult to look beyond the horizons of our lives. We find it even more difficult to get our heads get round eternity which one humourist compared to a Test Match.

“Cricket is a game” said this wit, “invented by the English, who not being a spiritual people, need something to help them understand the concept of eternity.”

One earthly experience that lasts longer than a Test Match is a prison sentence.

There are several reasons why I want to focus on this today — First and foremost because here we are looking at a passage of scripture that highlights this subject as the last and perhaps the toughest challenge that Jesus sets his followers.

After asking them why they didn't feed him when he was hungry, visit him when he was sick, welcome the strangers – (today's migrants?) and so on he finally asks why none of them visited him in prison.

It may have come as a surprise to a 1st century audience as much as it know does to a 21st century audience that Jesus seemed to include criminals in his sweeping embrace of love as he does in the words of Verse 45:

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“I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these brothers of mine you did not do it for me”.

Let’s reflect on this for a moment not only for ancient scriptural reasons but also because in the modern calendar of the church this is Prisons Week. And additionally because as you heard in the introduction I have been a prisoner myself.

Ever since I came out of jail over 15 years ago having served seven months inside for perjury, I have kept in touch with prisoners and prisons. I do so by being active in offender mentoring and in prison ministry.

Only last week I spent the afternoon in HMP Pentonville launching an Alpha Course to some 40 inmates. So I understand something from the heart about the impact both of being visited in prisons and of visiting prisoners.

To get us into all this, let me begin by telling you what it feels like to be at the coal face of prison.

Anyone’s first day in prison is quite a shock to them to the system. Mine certainly was. As I came off the prison van which brought me from the Old Bailey to HMP Belmarsh, one of my fellow prisoners said in a loud voice to all of us:

“Welcome to Hell”

- Entering the Cage. Business from Courts
- Atmosphere in Cage terrible. Anger, despair, physical violence.
- Habitual optimism of criminals - Not guilty - Judicial leniency

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- Sobbing - Head in hands - Outbursts of fury and physical rage
- Battering head against iron bars - Gang kicking each other- Scuffling and fighting and punch up
- Officer says "You lot are all going to through induction".
- Word survives in two institutions:
- HM Prisons and Church of England. Vicars and convicts both inducted.
- Rituals different/ Strip searching etc
- Hellish noise and aggression. I will daringly tackle the spiritual subject of hell later. But in case you think I am laying it on too thick let me ...
- Lighten the mood humour psychiatrist story "Aitken you go to see the psychiatrist"
- The word Delusion is also a good one for the sheep and the goats parable

For this parable often creates three major delusions among those who hear it.

Delusion No 1 is the mistaken belief that what Jesus said doesn't actually apply to us today.

Some liberal theologians see it as a metaphorical, allegorical fairy tale relating to unsaved 1st century Gentiles and not to us contemporary people.

Some reformed theologians regard it as dangerously close to justification by works – the very antithesis of the teachings of Paul, Augustine and Luther. Although other theologians point to the famous verse in the letter of James (2:17) "Faith without works is dead".

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On the issue of works, some modern social commentators argue that in our society today where we have extensive Welfare State, benefits,

A fine National Health Service

We have Government hostels for migrants

And a decently run prison system we don't need to listen to a parable from 20 centuries ago urging us to supplement the state's care by personal good works.

How wrong all these delusions are. We must rebut them by championing three great spiritual truths implicit in our reading.

First truth is that we are all accountable. We may be free to live our lives just as we please but in the end we will have to give our account to The One who gave us life.

The second truth is that God's judgement awaits us all. There will be no exceptions. Whether He is a merciful judge may come down to whether we have recognised a third truth.

That third truth is that at the heart of Christian faith lies a relationship with Jesus. Such a relationship means a willingness to follow Jesus in his loving sacrificial care for others particularly those he describes in this parable of the "least of these brothers of mine". Are we willing to imitate him?

The second delusion which often occurs as a reaction to this parable is the claim that Jesus' harshest words in it can be ignored on the ground that there is no such thing as hell.

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Now we need to be careful here. It is true that the old hellfire and brimstone preachers of yesteryear were probably OTT in some of their sermons on the terrors of hell.

In this context there is an amusing story about an old fashioned minister from the stern unbending Presbyterian Church of Scotland who regularly preached on hell. One Sunday morning he was warming to his familiar theme, advising his congregation that in hell there would be "wailing and gnashing of teeth".

Sitting in the front row was an infirm but rebellious old lady who could stand it no more, so she became a heckler. Through her toothless gums she muttered in the direction of the pulpit: "Not for me. I haven't got any teeth".

"Madam, in hell teeth will be provided", retorted the Minister.

This story may be apocryphal but it illustrates an attitude that is increasingly familiar.

Hell is no longer feared because it has become a bit of a joke.

A loving God, so the hell-ridiculers claim, could not possibly believe in as judgemental and punitive a way as the King does in the parable when he says to the goats (verse 41):

"Depart from me, you who are cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels".

(Matthew 25:41)

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Inevitably there are many interpretations of this difficult verse of scripture, such as the Origen view that the punishments of Hell may not last for ever or the von Balthasar view that with prayer all sinners can be saved from Hell.

These arguments are well above my amateur theologian's pay grade. But perhaps two facts in the debate stand out.

The first is that there are uncomfortably many contemporary examples in human hearts and human experiences that suggest that hell can be a here and now reality.

To give a highly topical example:

I was struck, when preparing for this talk by a quote from on TV of the French police officers who was among the first on the scene at the storming of the Bataclan theatre just after the terrorist massacre there:

As he squelched his way in the dark across the floor which at first he thought was flooded with water but then realised it was covered with blood and human entrails this policeman said:

"I thought I had arrived in Hell".

Whatever imagery we use ancient or modern, perhaps the last word on the arguments about hell should be this.

If Hell does not exist in some form or another then it makes heaven meaningless.

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Which brings us to the third delusion arising from the arguments on those who seek to dilute or marginalise the sheep and the goat's parable. This is the delusion that heaven does not exist either.

Now Heaven is a difficult subject too because so little is actually said about it in the scriptures. I was once made to study heaven. The context here was that after I came out of prison I went to the one place which had worse food and worse plumbing than a prison. This was an Anglican Theological college, Wycliffe Hall, Oxford.

There I had to write weekly essays and a particularly challenging one was set with the title:

"What is heaven and who will get into it?"

I studiously wrote three or four thousand words on the subject but my tutor Alistair McGrath, now the Regius Professor of Divinity called me up short in the tutorial by saying that there were only two things any one knew about Heaven:

- 1 Heaven is where God dwells
- 2 The population of Heaven will be full of surprises.

Those surprises bring me back to the subject of prisoners, their rehabilitation and their redemption.

Almost the only person we can be certain of knowing that they are in Heaven is the penitent thief who was promised entry into Paradise as he hung alongside Jesus on the Cross.

His presence in Heaven is a reminder that no-one falls so low that they are beneath the reach of God's Grace.

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I wonder if that was why Jesus included prisoners in his list of “the least of these my brothers” in his parable.

Incidentally, Jesus may not have been speaking exclusively about criminal prisoners.

For there are many kinds of prisoners

- Prisoners of sin
- Prisoners of wrong relationships
- Prisoners of flawed pointless, purposeless, life styles.

Any of us who have ever been in any of these categories will know how much such prisoners also need God’s grace.

Grace cannot be earned. It is a gift from God. But perhaps we can position ourselves to receive this gift by learning from this parable.

What it seeks to do is to persuade us to position and redirect our lives in the direction of a right relationship with Jesus.

And it makes us face the fact that there is one, and one only test of that relationship. It is an uncomfortable test. It is this:

How in our lives have we treated the poor, the sick, the lonely, the hungry and the imprisoned?

We’ve been on quite a journey in this talk for the past 25 minutes, but many of the highways and byways we have been exploring are almost irrelevant.

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We can put aside the theologians' theories about Heaven and Hell or their arguments about whether justification by faith or by works are mutually exclusive.

We can forget about the politicians' promises, admirable though they currently are, about new policies for the reforming prisons and rehabilitating offenders.

The parable of the sheep and the goats is deeply personal, and seriously challenging.

Its challenges can be expressed in three questions:

What have I done for Jesus?

What ought I do for Jesus?

What am I going to do for Jesus?

And when we try to answer then remember his words:

"When you do it, to the least of these my brothers you do it me".

Amen