**22nd November 2020**

**Matthew 25. 31-46**

In this week’s Gospel passage, we read how the Son of Man, when he comes in glory will ‘separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left’.

As we head into winter the reality TV programme ‘*I’m a Celebrity get me out of here’* always comes on to cheer us up in those dark dismal evenings. Those of you who have been watching it this week will know that I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to comment on it.

For those who have never watched it, the programme takes a group of celebrities and plops them down in uncomfortable surroundings for a few weeks. Usually it is in the jungle but with the pandemic this year it’s a castle in North Wales.

In the camp they have to undertake a number of trials and challenges in order to win food. Most days the public vote to select one of the celebrities to perform these trials. The public separate the sheep from the goats!

One of the celebrities who has regularly been scapegoated (excuse the pun) has been Jordon North, a DJ from Radio One.[[1]](#endnote-1) On the first day he showed a fear of heights and was actually sick on the show before having to abseil down the cliff. The public in their great sympathy towards his weaknesses and vulnerabilities have picked on him ever since!

On Monday, after showing his fear of heights, he had the misfortune to be landed with the first live bushtucker trial of the series and it was straight in at the deep end.

In Viper Vault, Jordan had to face his worst fear - snakes. He was placed in a tomb of snakes and had to undo some vaults to win food for the group.

He used a positive visualization trick to get over his fear. "My brother, who is a paratrooper, said to me no matter how scared or cold you get, to think of your happy place," he told Ant and Dec.[[2]](#endnote-2)

So, where was Jordan's happy place? A tropical beach, maybe? Some idyllic meadow? In the bosom of the family home? No - Turf Moor, the home of Burnley FC. My football team.

Jordan's a big Clarets fan and, throughout the trial, he kept shouting, "happy place, happy place, Turf Moor, Turf Moor".

Of course, because this is football, the trolls weren't slow to jump on it and every club who have got a result at Turf Moor recently wanted to remind them of it.

Turf moor happy place for Spurs. Turf Moor Happy place for Chelsea!

On Monday, Ant and Dec were kind enough to remind him after his ordeal that Burnley sit second bottom in the table and are waiting for a first Premier League win this season, joking that if Turf Moor was his happy place, they wouldn't want to see his sad place.

Poor Jordon.

One of the fascinating aspects of this reading is that before the people are judged (for their actions), they are initially separated.

We are familiar with the saying ‘united we stand, divided we fall’ and, in our society, we tend to eschew anything that causes separation or creates division. One of the common complaints levelled against ‘outgoing’ US President, Donald J. Trump, is his divisiveness. And a key plank of President-elect, Joe Biden’s campaign, was a commitment to bring both sides together to create a ‘United States’ (although time alone will tell whether this will be possible during his tenure). Similarly, the ‘departures’ in Boris Johnson’s inner circle of advisors were an attempt to create unity and improve morale in the Cabinet Office and the Tory Party.

Unlike today’s Gospel reading, which clearly delineates between those who did the right thing (the sheep), and those who did not (the goats), humans tend to use arbitrary – and unhelpful – criteria to effect division;  such as ethnicity, religion, class, politics etc. Moreover, there is a clear element of scapegoating linked to our divisions – people and groups are singled out and blamed for their activities and behaviours. History shows that this reproaching invariably leads to some form of punishment.

*Richard Reddie[[3]](#endnote-3) writes that when he was* 16 he first visited the Caribbean, and in parts of Jamaica sheep are sheared due to the heat and certain parasites. Without a fleece, a sheep looks remarkably like a goat, and at times it was hard to differentiate. Such an early experience taught him a lot about assumptions and rushing to judgement.

We see from today’s reading that Jesus Christ is the great – and only – judge; a king with the integrity and wisdom to know who is truly ‘good’ and who is not. We also know that he is compassionate and has a passion to see real unity between God and all those created in his image.

Jesus’ teaching in this passage tells how, when God’s reign comes in its fullness, the nations will be separated in the same way a shepherd separates sheep and goats. In Jesus’ day, flocks of sheep and goats together were common. Shepherds would count their animals at the end of the day, separating the goats, who were less hardy and needed to be kept warm, from the sheep.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, sheep sometimes are an image of God’s people (for example, Psalm 100:3 and Isaiah 53:6). In the New Testament, the image of sheep often refers to those who follow Christ, the shepherd (for example, John 10:1–11 and Hebrews 13:20). On the day Christ reigns in full glory, Jesus says the nations will be separated based on whether they have fed the hungry ones, clothed the naked ones, and so forth. In this way Jesus announces the judgment of all nations, both Jewish and Gentile, according to how they have responded to the call to follow and serve Christ.

Most commentators believe that when Jesus says *‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me’*  – he is talking about his followers.

The criterion imposed for the judgement is therefore an interesting one. Everything hinges on the way in which those who are judged have treated the followers of Jesus. Instead of the nations being judged on how they have treated Israel which some contemporary Jewish writings envisaged, Jesus, consistently with his whole definition of God’s people around himself, declares that he will himself judge the world on how it has treated his renewed Israel.

Matthew places this parable just before the Passion of Christ where Jesus would be hungry, thirsty, naked, a prisoner. Most of the followers of Jesus would endure the same treatment. This parable would have been a great encouragement to them that their older brother, Jesus, is already ruling the world and taking note of what they suffer. This judgement is an opportunity for vindication.

People often speculate how will God judge the nations, especially those who have not heard of the gospel of Christ or those who reject Christ. Maybe this parable gives a clue?

Justice is one of those deep longings of humanity. If there is no justice, then deep within ourselves we know that something is out of joint. But justice doesn’t simply mean punishment. The vivid imagery in this parable may make many cringe. This judge seems harsh.

In contrast, the British public would be far more compassionate we feel. For example, they kept voting Jordan North to do the trails on I’m a Celebrity. Very compassionate aren’t we!

Put the parable in context. If you were on the receiving end of violent torture and death because you were a follower of Jesus – you would cry out for justice and punishment of the perpetrators. But interpret the parable in the context of the whole of Jesus life and ministry, his death and resurrection. He came to judge – to put right what was wrong – but in a compassionate and merciful way – seeking the salvation of the world. Redemption is his business.

That doesn’t mean to say that we shouldn’t be compassionate and meet the needs of each other. Although this parable may apply to how the nations treat the followers of Jesus, in light of the total life and teaching of Jesus it could equally apply to how followers of Christ respond to those in need.

Do we let God’s life and love flow through us to others and so engage in the process of becoming more caring individuals and communities?

Faith may not depend on works but it surely must result in them. The warning here is not so much that Jesus will reject us, but that, through turning our back on others, we may find that we have rejected him.

How much can you give? Can you experience compassion fatigue? The cost of giving, the fear of being exploited. Charity begins at home, especially when you are worried for your own safety and security in this pandemic? The sense of personal failure at not responding to need – the fear of being numbered amongst the goats.

There are challenges for modern readers in understanding this text.

First, we might hear the truth of Jesus’ teaching, but find it difficult to leave our personal comfort zones to enact the mandate.

Second, the text can lead individuals or congregations to approach those who are in need as objects of their good works. They may, in this way, donate money or volunteer time all with an eye toward “us” helping “them.”

What is key, therefore, is to recognize the encounter that is at the heart of the passage. In such action, we also encounter the living presence of Christ in one another. In other words, those who have plenty are as much in “need” (of God) as those with little.

I remember John Bell talking to me about the importance of touching those who are unwell as necessary for our wholeness and healing. Sadly touch is forbidden in this rotten pandemic. He said that Jesus needed people to touch him because he had a need to be seen as fully human – one of us. They had a need to be healed. Both needed each other’s touch.

There is always a feeling of ‘us’ and ‘them’ when you offer acts of mercy and compassion. ‘We’ are doing a good work to ‘them’. Yet in some way ‘we’ too are receiving. It may be a need to relieve our guilt at having so much or being so comfortable. It may be our need to look good and kind and generous – virtue signalling is the contemporary term. It may be deeper needs.

I know that when I have to visit people who are ill, or frail, or near the end of their lives I know I have to face my own fears about becoming like them one day. I fear being ill, or dependent or near death. Yet as we encounter each other both of us are touched. Hopefully their need for understanding and companionship is met. I receive from seeing their courage and faith and by facing up to my fears.

When we are confronted by poverty and disease, we are confronted with our own disease of materialism and anxiety about our own comfort and security. In this way the church needs contact with the poor and suffering in order to cure its own disease and poverty of spirit.

John Bell, again, told a story about a church in the United States that holds a meal once a month after worship and the whole community is invited. A third of the guests are wealthy and affluent, a third are black, a third are homeless. He says the wealthy and affluent come because they recognise something is happening, the kingdom of God is present and they want to be part of it. The rich give to the poor but the poor also give to the rich in the relationships and conversations that happen around those tables.

The encounter with one another may lead to relationships. Acts of compassion may become experiences of God’s presence. As we see Christ present in other people, perhaps they will see Christ present in us as well.

As we use our hearts and hands to share the love of God, we open ourselves to encountering Christ in others and having them encounter Christ in us

**Prayer**

Heavenly Father,
as we consider the parable of the sheep and the goats,
let us be followers who seek to encourage unity and amity among all those who are made in your image.

May we never be people who rush to judgement,
or fall into the trap of condemning or criticizing harshly
those who do not share our beliefs, political views or cultural values.

May we display your compassion, integrity and wisdom,
when engaging with the ‘world’,
remembering your cautions to ‘judge not’ or ‘cast the first stone’

May we encounter you in others and may they encounter you in us.

This we ask in Jesus’ name.
**Amen.**

1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/54973688> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-54973402> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/110-november-december-2020-ab/proper-29-christ-the-king/postscript [↑](#endnote-ref-3)