

“When the Son of man comes in his glory and all the angels with him he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates sheep from goats.”

What is the difference between a sheep and a goat? About 50 IQ points – in favour of the sheep! That is what I read on a website called “Sheep 101” – with a name like that I guess the answer is biased towards the sheep! It’s not hard for us to tell the difference between sheep and goats. Just in case you can’t the website says sheep have thick curly horns, goats have long narrow horns. Sheep need to be shorn, goats don’t. Some goats have beards. Sheep’s tail’s hang down, a goats’ go up. Sheep tend to graze, goats browse. Sheep hang around together more than goats. Goats stink more and are more likely to have lice than sheep. Separating sheep from goats is pretty simple really. Or is it....?

Today’s Gospel tells us that at the end of time ***“When the Son of man comes in his glory and all the angels with him he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates sheep from goats.”***

The big question with eternal consequences we want to know the answer to is “How can you tell a sheep from a goat when it comes to the last judgement of every human being?” How can you tell who is going to heaven and who isn’t? How will God separate people into those two groups? Think carefully, it’s not as simple as it sounds and the basis we use may not be the same one God does.

To judge means to separate, fact from fiction, truth from error, good from bad, right from wrong. Many people hope that one day God will separate the good from the bad people. The trouble is it is not so easy to work out who is good and who is bad. In fact we often misjudge others every day. In Palestine it was not that easy to tell the difference between sheep and goats - only the shepherd would know. It is just as impossible for us to weigh up other peoples lives and judge them. Judgement belongs to God to the Good Shepherd who not only sees what we do or don’t do but who sees into our hearts - our motives and what we think and believe. Just as well he makes the judgement call not us.

At first glance the picture Jesus paints here seems to imply that the sheep on his right, those who go to heaven are people who do the right kind of things - those who are invited into heaven are commended for looking after the sick, feeding the hungry, clothing the poor and so on. Those who are rejected are condemned for failing to help others when they could have.

The story seems to place us at the centre as if everything hinges on what we do or don’t do. But Jesus is always at the centre and the rest of the Bible clearly tells us being saved hinges on him and his great act of love and mercy when he died on the cross to forgive us. In the picture he uses the word “me” 14 times - he is the centre of the story and our attitude to and relationship to him is decisive when he judges.

Jesus the judge is the Good Shepherd who lay down his life for us his sheep. In baptism he made us God’s children and he has prepared for us an inheritance in heaven. He prepared all this from before the world began. Being saved and our place in heaven does not depend on the good things we do but on Jesus and what he has already done and prepared for us.

Jesus said: ***“My sheep listen to my voice, I know them and they follow me and I give them eternal life.....whoever believes in him is not condemned.....whoever believes and is baptised will be saved.....St Paul wrote For it is by grace you have been saved through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works...”***

Entry to heaven is a matter of who you believe in and trust, not what you do. Believe in Christ and be saved by Christ, trust in yourself and be judged by yourself. The righteous in the Bible are those who look to Christ for their righteousness, not their good lives. ***“The righteous will live by faith”***.

But the truth of your relationship with someone can be seen not only in how you talk about them and treat them but in how you talk about and treat their friends. I can say I love my wife but if I treated her parents and brothers and sisters and friends badly and neglected our children she would have reason to doubt I loved her at all. One way I show my love for her is to show kindness to them.

I can say "I love God" and "I believe Jesus forgives my sins" but whether we really do love and trust him or not will show in how we treat his friends and his children - especially the poor, the sick, the hungry the victims of injustice and even the prisoner who we think is getting what he deserved! That is the test of my relationship with Jesus. In loving others we love him. I can say I love Jesus and believe in him all I like in church but the test will be how I love and serve Jesus by loving and serving other people - even the least significant person on earth in my eyes. Jesus said: "**Whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine you did for me**" and "**whatever you did not do for the least of these you did not do for me**". Now we don't expect to meet Jesus in the poor and looked down on people in our world just like people didn't expect Jesus himself to hang around with them and they didn't expect to meet God on a cross, poor, sick, broken, hungry, lonely, dying. But we meet God in Jesus, that broken man on the cross. He is our righteousness, he puts us on the right side of God. And we express our righteousness in the way we treat other broken people for him, as if they were him. These acts of kindness are not the reason some people are saved and others not, but they are evidence that God's grace and forgiveness and mercy have taken effect in our lives.

The two sets of people in Jesus' picture are both surprised by his judgement. Those who are saved are amazed that Jesus saw the most insignificant things they did coming from faith in him, and those who are rejected are surprised that Christ saw what they didn't do for him.

If you live life in relation to Jesus Christ - that's how you'll be seen and judged by God. Did you notice the sins of those who were saved never even got a mention - they have been forgiven. The only things Jesus will bring to mind in the end are the acts of love and kindness that came from faith in him and love for him. "**Come you who are blessed by my Father - take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me**"

On the other hand if you live life without Christ, not wanting his forgiveness and not looking to him in faith, rejecting him and living for yourself – that's how you'll be seen and judged, without Christ - not only will the bad things we do count against them but the good things they failed to do will also count against them. "**Then he will say to those on his left: Depart from me you who are cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat. I was a stranger and you did not invite me in. I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me**".

This picture of the last judgement is a confronting one, and we had better not minimise it or else we belittle the death of Jesus for us. Hell, which is separation from God, is real, but Jesus said it was prepared for the devil and evil angels, not for us, and we only need to start worrying about that if we reject the Good Shepherd and live without him. When I look into this passage in the mirror of God's law I see a goat staring back at me, I stand condemned for what I have done and have not done in my life. But when I look at the cross of Christ I see God looking at me as one of his sheep, a sheep his son died for. And there the judgement holds no fears, only joy.

Look to Christ, thank him, trust him and love him not only by your thoughts and words but by seeing him in each and every person you meet and treating them as your Lord and saviour himself. Don't be afraid of the last judgement, the separation of "sheep from goats". Look forward to being surprised by God's grace and hearing his invitation "**Come, you who are blessed by my Father take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world**".