

Waiting in Service

High Street Uniting, Frankston Matthew 25:31 - 46



We have, week by week, told ourselves the story of Jesus - birth, arrest and trial, crucifixion, resurrection, and walked with him in teaching and healing and compassion - as we worshipped throughout the year. And all of that is gathered into this increasingly controversial celebration of Christ the King, somewhat softened for modern minds as The Reign of Christ. But what a challenging reading

we have for our celebration!

King on a throne! We don't like talking about kings, we're individuals who democratically chose our leaders. Even the word kingdom sits hard with us, we've developed the new word 'kin-dom.' Talk of kings makes us uncomfortable.

Judgement! We don't like to talk about judgement, it's too fire and brimstone, too exclusive and self-congratulatory. We like the inclusive Jesus dining with sinners and welcoming people into community. Judgement makes us uncomfortable.

Sheep and goats! We don't like these animal analogies. It's bad enough to be compared to sheep - those dim creatures that blindly follow the loudest voice - do we have to be compared to goats! Being compared to animals makes us uncomfortable.

Instead of a great celebration, we're presented with an uncomfortable reading. Well, guess what? It's meant to make you uncomfortable, because when you're uncomfortable you're most open to new ideas and open to changing your opinions and understanding. When Jesus told this story to the disciples it was meant to make them uncomfortable, because they thought they were the sheep and Jesus is telling them they might be goats. When Matthew wrote it down for his community, it was meant to make them uncomfortable, because it said 'all the nations' and they expected it to say 'all the other nations'. When theologians and scholars look at this story, it's meant to make them uncomfortable because there is no mention of theology or statements of faith, or any of the usual things used to define our faith. Let your discomfort lead you to wrestle with this story that might be a parable or might be a prophecy.

The first thing to consider is that this is the fifth in a series of stories about the future and waiting and expecting; some are stories, and some are parables. Piecing them together will give you a better understanding. Remembering, of course, that Biblical prophecy is often looking to the future through the lens of the past to inform the present.

And the next thing to consider is that no single piece of text contains the whole Gospel; Jesus may have told this story, but it is just that, a story about one facet of what God wants us to know. There is no sense in asking 'what does all the nations mean?' or 'why is there no mention of faith or belief?' This is a story with one point: Not everyone who looks expectantly to the coming of Jesus as Lord is doing God's will.

In the Ancient Middle East, the species of sheep and goat that were common looked very much alike; it took an experienced shepherd to tell them apart. This story is a twin to the parable of the wheat and the weeds. You can't easily tell which people are following Jesus with the right motives, actions, and faith and which are adhering to the community for the wrong reasons. Only God knows. But, unlike the parable of the wheat and the weeds, this story points us to what are the right motives, actions, and faith. To share the love of God with those in need.

A vast crowd of people are gathered in heaven, milling around wondering what is happening. The word gets out that they are gathered for judgement. And some people get very angry. "Judgement! How can God judge me? What does God know of my life and all the dreadful things that I have been through? To judge me, God would have to have been born into poverty and struggle". Another said, "To judge me, God would have to know what it was to be homeless and dependent on the charity of others." Another said, "To judge me, God would have to have experienced life under a cruel military dictatorship, wrongfully arrested and tortured." Another added, "Yes, and publicly humiliated and put to death." And then someone whispered, "Jesus." And they all fell silent.

When David, the new king, danced down the street to welcome the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, he set the standard for the kingdom; 'this is how we are to behave - joyful reverence for all that God has done'. Very few kings or queens have followed that example, George remaining in London during the blitz is one, but Jesus certainly did. His life was an example of how the kingdom of God was to operate. We may not like the idea of kings and judgement but look at all that Jesus went through in his life and yet none of that was an excuse to not care about others; he lived a life of compassion and care. Never asking if someone deserved care, never looking the other way, or claiming to be too busy, never assessing the risk of engagement. The standard that he set for the kingdom of God was seeing need and meeting need.

As I said, no one story captures all the Gospel; this is not the total definition of what we are to be as the people of God. The love that this story calls for - meeting simple needs - is in response to the gracious love shown to us and accepted in faith through the name of Jesus Christ as Lord. This story doesn't replace all the scriptural calls to repentance and belief and faith. And it isn't a competition between Matthew and James on one hand and John and Paul on the other. Both are needed. This story of the sheep and the goats sits nicely beside John's story of the man born blind. The Pharisees who reject the man are the goats; people who claim faith and God and yet are unwilling to share the love of God with others. Not everyone who looks to Jesus as Lord is doing God's will.

Let this story make you uncomfortable, unsure about all those philosophical categories of royalty and democracy and divinity and humanity, because being certain about such things leaves you unable to hear the word of God. Let this story make you uncomfortable, on edge as to whether you're a sheep or a goat, because that discomfort will keep you alert to needs around you and ward off complacency about your place with God as a follower of Jesus Christ. Let this story make you uncomfortable, unsure whether it's words, or emotions, or actions that allow you to be a follower of Jesus Christ, because attending to all three means that you are moving from religion to faith. Wrestle with scripture and don't allow yourself to be comfortable, settled, certain, because such comfort is the death of faith.