

Matthew 25:31-46

SHEEP AND GOATS

I am always wary when someone begins by telling me, “There are two kinds of people in this world...”

It’s often the preamble to a pointless generalisation designed to illustrate that the speaker is on the right side of some arbitrary line and I am, by implication, on the wrong side.

It goes without saying that if you draw a line on the ground, some of us will be on one side of it and the rest of us will be on the other. It’s a topographical truism. It’s something so obviously true that it’s hardly worth saying. And when it is used as a tool of moral assertion it’s so easy to manipulate by choosing where to draw the line that the results are never going to be very enlightening.

Nevertheless, in the right hands, it can be the vehicle for little nuggets of wit and wisdom:

- Mark Twain said there are two kinds of public speaker in this world – those who get nervous and those who are liars;
- Newspaper columnist Pauline Phillips said there are two kinds of people in this world: those who walk into a room and say “There you are!” and those who walk into a room and say “Here I am!”

One thing is sure – you are oversimplifying things drastically if you seriously maintain that humans can be so neatly divided.

But the urge to draw that line on the ground seems to be hard-wired into human nature and our sense of identity: don’t we define ourselves as much by what we **are not** as by what we **are**?

Don’t we cast around for some social group whose very otherness helps us draw together? We are not Asylum Seekers; we are not people with HIV; we are not Muslims; we are not Immigrants. Pick your own favourite “others”, picture them safely behind bars and then see how much better you feel about yourself.

The Bible has its share of “othering”, as we might call it. In the early days, it was the expression of the Israelites’ identity against other tribes who wished them actual harm – those Edomites, those Ishmaelites, those Moabites, those

Philistines and the rest. Even in more settled times, the Jews have always made themselves distinct from the Gentiles by restrictive laws on food, dress and other matters.

In Matthew's Gospel, there is the starkest and most implausible of divisions in the judgement story we heard this morning: all the nations are divided into the sheep at the right hand of the Son of Man and the goats at his left hand. No shades of grey there.

So what kind of story is this? A prophecy? A parable? I believe there are elements of both.

It is a *prophecy* in the sense that it is a warning and a statement of uncomfortable truth, not in the sense of a prediction of the future.

It is a *parable* by the classic definition that C H Dodd gave us in the 1930s, being a metaphor drawn from nature or common life that is strange enough to really make us think. It is unusual, for a parable, in being a story set in the future; the normal form of parable is an invented "once-upon-a-time" story – but in essence it has the same function as all the other parables: it's a metaphorical lesson about the right way to live.

There is a lot in Matthew's Gospel about Jesus overturning people's expectations and surprising people by what he said, which emphasises that the values of the kingdom of God were not the accepted values of the religious and social structures in which his hearers lived.

Those with assumed privileges were often given rather a hard time: the rich young man who came to Jesus found that it was not enough to have kept the commandments and was sent away to sell all his possessions; the Scribes and Pharisees, accustomed to being respected as those who interpreted the Law of Moses, were denounced as hypocrites.

The reverse is true in the Beatitudes – those whom Jesus said were blessed were – of all people – the mourners, the meek, the poor in spirit.

Matthew seems to have chosen surprise as the unifying element of the moral teachings that he assembled in his Gospel.

In one parable, a man receiving a surprise invitation to a wedding arrived in the wrong clothes – and was spotted by the king, who had him thrown out. “For many are called but few are chosen.”

In another wedding parable, five of the ten bridesmaids were taken by surprise because they had no oil for their lamps when the bridegroom finally arrived. “For no-one knows the day or the hour.”

In the parable of the talents, the slave who – wisely, we might think – had safeguarded the assets his master entrusted to him by burying them in the ground instead of risking them in the money markets must have been very surprised to be condemned and thrown into outer darkness. “For to those who have, more will be given; and from those that have not, even what they have will be taken away.”

As for the sheep and goats in the judgement parable, there is surprise on both sides. The goats are taken aback by the accusation that they did not care for Jesus, and the sheep are no less taken aback by being told they *did* care for Jesus.

That the goats do not see themselves as goats is perhaps to be expected; but if the sheep do not see themselves as sheep, what is going on?

In a lesson about moral behaviour we would expect to be told what are the right choices to make and the right actions to take. Not here: the lack of moral self-awareness on the part of the sheep in this parable shows us that in Matthew’s view it is not about consciously choosing moral actions but about thinking and doing the right thing *because it is in our nature*, and being blessed for that.

Matthew’s Jesus does not say to the Disciples, “I command you to become the salt of the earth and the light of the world.” He tells them that is what they are. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus does not command his followers to become peacemakers, to become pure in heart, to hunger and thirst after righteousness: he blesses those who do those things.

In the same way, the judgement of the sheep is the recognition of moral qualities that have been there all along. Elsewhere in the Gospel, Jesus uses a different image to recognise the same thing, saying that trees are known by their fruit; that good trees cannot bear bad fruit and that bad trees cannot bear good fruit. The

sheep are surprised by the judgement because they have simply been doing what is in their nature.

So by the sound of it, there are no genuine moral choices; it's all in our genes; either we're naturally good (sheep) and therefore blessed, or we're naturally bad (goats) and therefore condemned.

No. At least I hope not.

When Jesus taught in parables he was speaking directly to the people in front of him; he was not speaking over their heads to you and me. Precious though these much-loved passages are to us, we risk distorting their meaning if we read them in isolation. There is a context to the parables and encounters in Matthew's Gospel, as in all the Gospels, and it is only by paying proper attention to context that we find out what this author's particular "angle" is on the ministry and teaching of Jesus.

Remember that after Matthew tells us Jesus came into Jerusalem, he presents us over four chapters not only with several parables but also with several encounters between Jesus and the Chief Priests, Elders, Scribes and Pharisees. They were questioning his authority, trying to trick him with questions about paying taxes; he was denouncing them as hypocrites, as whitewashed tombs, as blind guides who lock people out of the kingdom of heaven, who do good deeds only to be seen by others.

For Matthew, hypocrisy is the greatest failing, and is the reason why God's people have lost their way. So the question is how we live authentically and not falsely.

The authentic life of faith is when what you **do** matches what you **say** and springs from what you **are** by God's grace.

And where is the prophetic warning? Where is the uncomfortable truth in the story? It is of course in the reaction of the goats – shocked and surprised because none of this comes naturally to them; they fail to see that in ignoring the hunger, thirst, nakedness, estrangement, sickness and imprisonment of others they are ignoring their Lord. They do not see their Lord in those others. I expect they are the kind of people who like drawing lines on the ground.

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