

Sheep, and Goats, and Crowns

If you have watched any season of *The Crown* on Netflix, it is easy to assume that the decisions of a constitutional monarch would be of no greater consequence than which social engagements to prioritize, or which openings to attend.

Nonetheless, we quickly see the queen forced to make judgements with great consequences for those about whom the decision is being made.

A few moments stand out, such as her resistance to Princess Margaret's desire to marry Group Leader Peter Townsend, a suitor deemed unsuitable by the queen and those around her. Likewise, the machinations undertaken to separate the Prince of Wales and Camilla Shand are portrayed as similarly heavy-handed, and we all know how that worked out.

It often seems that there are two types of people who enter the royal orbit: Those who are judged worthy to be in, and those who are out; those who are welcome, and those who must be treated politely, but kept at arms-length.

It is not *quite* the separation of the sheep and the goats, but for those left on the outside, for those whose lives were changed accordingly, it may as well have been.

It would be impossible to read the 25th chapter of Matthew's Gospel narrative, in my estimation, without being at least a *little* anxious based on its contents.

Unless we are sociopaths, there can be no joy in seeing such a sorting. I cannot imagine we would want to *participate* in such a sorting.

As I noted last week, if we push parables too far in the wrong direction, the analogies they hold will invariably break down. Hence, we focus on what we *think* is the main thing in a parable. For those of us bent on interpreting the Gospel through the lens of the love of Jesus Christ, a perspective we come to by considering the *whole* Bible and not merely parts of it, that means we are always looking for what about the parable constitutes *good news*.

Because it is not good news, it is not the Gospel.

But it would be impossible to read the 25th chapter of Matthew and not become at least a little bit leery of bridesmaids locked out of the house, servants languishing in the outer darkness, and now the poor old goats apparently bound for the proverbial barbecue.

We must find *some* good news, but we must also recognize and reconcile where the subplot of these parables leaves us with a cold chill blowing through our goodwill, because these are actions that have consequences for those seemingly left out.

With any literary criticism, we pay attention to *where* things fall in the story. A detail included in the first few pages may simply be character development, or foreshadowing, or it may prove vital later in the plot. But paying attention to how the story unfolds right before the climax of the story generally will help us to perceive correctly the way the narrative develops.

The parables we have been reading these past few weeks, before we come to today, Christ the King Sunday, and before the lectionary abandons Matthew and turns to the cozier (!) Advent and Christmas narratives, actually unfold in Matthew's Gospel immediately prior to Christ's passion: His entry into Jerusalem, his arrest, trial, conviction, and execution. Matthew has been telling the story in a way in which we are being prepared for what is to come: A time when the consequences of Jesus' Gospel message and kingdom preaching will lead to the culmination of his ministry, and the Crisis of human history: The cross and the resurrection.

When the consequences are so clear, we cannot look at the story and say that one thing is the same as the other. One course of action will not yield the same result as another. One decision does not take us to the same outcome as another.

Being prepared is not the same as being unprepared.

Perceiving *harshness* is not the same as seeing *generosity*.

Attending to the other is not the same as rushing by.

Is it any wonder that beneath the stories of preparation, perception, and generous living, there is an undercurrent that when these things are not present, everything will look different?

A world with good news looks different from a world without.

But isn't that true generally?

A thing cannot be what it is, and also its opposite.

As the queen says to Tony Blair, "Being in government is not the same as being out of government."

Living into the grace of God is not the same as living for one's self.

Gentleness is not the same as harshness.

Death and resurrection are not the same thing.

I realize that binaries can sometimes force us to conclusions that are incomplete and unhelpful at best and destructive at worst, *but good and evil are not the same thing*.

If we believe otherwise, the rest of the Gospel will put paid to that in short order.

In a global sense, the truth that good and evil are not the same is good news, but if we want to rest a bit more easily, we would do well to strive with this text until we find some reconciliation between the sheep and the goats.

A generation ago, scholars presented a fairly consistent understanding of what was going on with the separation of the sheep and goats. In Matthew's world, where his Jewish congregation had just exited the synagogue (either willingly or not) whether or not the church could even exist was a matter of utmost importance. In that understanding of this parable, the *least* represents the persecuted church. Those who offered aid and comfort to the nascent church were seen as having done a good thing. To offer food, drink, clothing, shelter... all of these were acts of kindness and solidarity with the emerging Christian community, that would stand those who offered them in good stead.

To be a *sheep* was to have been hospitable to the church.

To be a *goat* was to have withheld hospitality from the followers of Jesus Christ, to have been hostile or indifferent to the needs of the marginalized Christians.

Such an interpretation seems conveniently to let us off the hook, but there is good support for it: This interpretation arises from careful attention to whom Jesus calls *brothers*, or *little ones*, elsewhere in Matthew's version of the story. When we want to know what a word means, we look at how else it is used.

Other scholars note, however, that there is an emerging interpretation that recognizes that the church *itself* is who is faced with this test. The *least*, in this view, are precisely who they appear to be in the story: Those who need comfort and sustenance.

Still others suggest that there is room for *both* interpretations of the parable. If this is true, then it is instructive for how the church goes about our business: Not entitled, and privileged, demanding the best of food, water, housing, but recognizing that where Christ calls us is to the world's deep hunger and need.

In such a calling, there is no room for the church to speculate on whom might be considered *sheep* or *goats*. Our job is to be the church, regardless.

Because of where these parables fall in the story, we are invited to speak plainly about what *is*, and what *is not*.

What is absolutely *not* the case is that neither the church nor individual Christians will ever be able to provide enough food/water/clothing/shelter to justify ourselves.

I don't tend to trade in always/never statements, but the church should never seek to justify ourselves.

Simply put, *we can't*; that is not how justification works.

If we wish to justify ourselves by our actions, puff ourselves up by our good deeds, we may as well get comfortable being with the goats. We do good works not to justify ourselves, but because Christ has already done so for us.

These stories stand at an important inflection point in Matthew's Gospel, but they are not the *whole* gospel. It is only in the light of the cross that we may see clearly God's love for us.

Our hope comes back, as it always does, to the cross.

The crown that Christ chooses is one fashioned from thorns, not gold and gemstones.

The palace that Christ inhabits is not one of luxury, but side-by-side with those who stand in need of food/water/shelter/clothing/*love*.

The throne Christ occupies is the human heart, and crowned there, he reigns wherever justice is done, where hope is needed, and where God's way in the world is lived.

The judgement *this* king renders cuts straight to the heart of human frailty.

But because the sovereign rendering judgment is also our advocate, we do not receive a fearful judgement, but rather one that will make us *whole*.

Two weeks ago, I had the privilege of having lunch with an old friend of mine just ahead of her 95th birthday. As such lunches tend to go, there was a great deal of reminiscing and friendly gossip. We kept talking about *memories*, and my friend began to recount a story that she had heard from her neighbor down the hall, whose ability to form and share her memories was failing.

For many years, when her friend's husband was a judge, as his vision began to fail, she would drive him from their home to the courthouse some distance away. They would talk about the cases that were coming up that day, and her husband would lament many of the judgements he would have to return.

Because it was a bit of a drive, she would sit in the back of the courtroom with her knitting and listen as the cases unfolded.

She recalled vividly one particular case, where her husband said on the drive in, "I am going to have to take away this young man's driving license. And he won't be able to get to work. It is going to upend his life, but it has to be done."

All the way to the courthouse, he fretted over what he had to do.

The judgement was rendered, the young man's license was revoked, and court adjourned.

As she was driving home, she recounted, it began to rain buckets.

They spotted the young man walking home in the rain. Knowing his address, the judge asked his wife to pull over, and he got out, and directed the young man into the front seat while he got in the back.

Eventually, the young man said, "You can let me out here."

But the judge said, "No, that is not your address. We will take you all the way home."

Along the way they talked about what he would say to his mother, about how he would cope without his car, about what his future looked like. By the time they arrived home, the young man bounded up the steps to his house, no longer fearful, but ready for what would come next.

Because it is Christ who reigns over heaven and earth, we need not fear being judged a sheep or a goat, only live in the light of the Gospel.

Because it is Christ who reigns over earth and heaven, it is the judge himself who will take us home.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.