

SUNDAY 26 November 2023

Introduction

Hymn 642 - Sing all creation, sing to God in gladness

**Sing, all creation, sing to God in gladness,
joyously serve him, singing hymns of homage,
chanting his praises, come before his presence:
Praise the Almighty!**

**Know that our God is Lord of all the ages;
he is our maker: we are all his creatures,
people he fashioned, sheep he leads to pasture:
Praise the Almighty!**

**Enter his temple, ringing out his praises;
sing in thanksgiving as you come before him;
blessing his bounty, glorify his greatness:
Praise the Almighty!**

**Great in his goodness is the Lord we worship;
steadfast his kindness, love that knows no ending;
faithful his word is, changeless, everlasting:
Praise the Almighty!**

Greeting

Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Blessed be God's kingdom, now and for ever.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.

And also with you.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'

Jesus said: 'This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

Sentence of the Day

O shout to the Lord in triumph all the earth. Serve the Lord with gladness and come before his face with songs of joy. Psalm 100:1

Prayer of Preparation

**Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden:
cleans the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name, through Christ our Lord. Amen.**

Prayer of the Day

God of power and love, who raised your Son, Jesus Christ, from death to life, resplendent in glory, to rule over all creation; free the world, to rejoice in his peace, to glory in his justice, and to live his love.

Unite the human race in Jesus Christ your Son, who lives and reigns with you and your Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. **Amen**

The Ministry of the Word

Exodus 34:11-14, 20-24

11 “ ‘For this is what the Sovereign Lord says:

I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. 12 As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. 13 I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. 14 I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. 15 I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord.

16 I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

20 “ ‘Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says to them: See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. 21 Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, 22 I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. 23 I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. 24 I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God**

Psalm 100

1 O shout to the Lord in triumph, all the earth.

Serve the Lord with gladness; and come before his face with songs of joy

2 Know that the Lord, he is God.

It is he who made us, and we are his;

we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

3 Come into his gates with thanksgiving and into his courts with praise;
give thanks to him and praise his name.

**4 For the Lord is good and his loving mercy is for ever;
his faithfulness throughout all generations.**

Ephesians 1:15-23

15 For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God’s people, 16 I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. 17 I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. 18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, 19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

That power is the same as the mighty strength 20 he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, 21 far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. 22 And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God**

Matthew 25:31-46

Glory to you, Lord Jesus Christ

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. 34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 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, 36 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.'

37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

40 "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

41 "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. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 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.'

44 "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

45 "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' 46 "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

This is the gospel of the Lord: **Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ**

Sermon Matthew 25:31-46 The Sheep and the Goats

The Nicene Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Prayers

Almighty God, your Son Jesus Christ has promised that you will hear us when we ask in faith: receive the prayers we offer.

Response: **Holy God, in your mercy**

The Lord's Prayer

Accept our prayers through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray,

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.

Confession

Knowing the goodness of God and our failure to respond with love and obedience, let us confess our sins, saying together.

Heavenly Father, you have loved us with an everlasting love, but we have broken your holy laws and have left undone what we ought to have done.

We are sorry for our sins and turn away from them.

For the sake of your Son who died for us, forgive us, cleanse us and change us.

By your Holy Spirit, enable us to live for you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

God is slow to anger and full of compassion, forgiving all who humbly repent and trust in his Son as Saviour and Lord. God therefore forgives you in Christ Jesus, in whom there is no condemnation. **Amen.**

Greeting of the Peace

We are the body of Christ. **His Spirit is with us.**

The peace of the Lord be always with you. **And also with you.**

Hymn - All People that on Earth do dwell

All people that on earth do dwell
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice
Him serve with mirth His praise forth tell
Come ye before Him and rejoice

Know that the Lord is God indeed
Without our aid He did us make
We are His folk, He doth us feed
And for His sheep He doth us take

O enter then His gates with praise
Approach with joy His courts unto
Praise laud and bless His name always
For it is seemly so to do

For know the Lord our God is good
His mercy is forever sure
His truth at all times firmly stood
And shall from age to age endure

Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise God all creatures here below
Praise God above you heavenly host
Praise Father Son and Holy Ghost
Amen

Offering

Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have these gifts to share. Accept and use our offerings for your glory and for the service of your kingdom.

Blessed be God forever.

The Thanksgiving

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**

Lift up your hearts. **We lift them to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. **It is right to give our thanks and praise.**

You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, making us in your own image. We praise you for your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, who by his death on the cross and rising to new life, offered the one true sacrifice for sin and obtained an eternal deliverance for his people.

Therefore, we lift our voices to praise you, saying,
**Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest.**

And now, gracious God, we thank you for these gifts of bread and wine, and pray that we who receive them, in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, according to our Saviour's word, in remembrance of his suffering and death, may share his body and blood.

On the night before he died, Jesus took bread, and when he had given you thanks he broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat. This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'

After supper, he took the cup, and again giving you thanks he gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Drink from this, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'

We eat this bread and drink this cup to proclaim the death of the Lord. We do this until he returns. **Come, Lord Jesus!**

Father, as we recall his saving death and glorious resurrection, may we who share these gifts be renewed by your Holy Spirit and united in the body of your Son. Bring us with all your people into the joy of your eternal kingdom, there to feast at your table and join in your eternal praise:
Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive praise and honour and glory and power for ever and ever. Amen.

We who are many are one body, **for we all share in the one bread.
The gifts of God for the people of God.**

Come let us take this holy sacrament of the body and blood of Christ in remembrance that he died for us, and feed on him in our hearts with thanksgiving.

The Lord's Supper is open to all who love the Lord.

After Communion

Giver of life and love, we thank you that in this heavenly banquet you invigorate and renew us. Living in the unity of the Spirit, may we boldly use your gifts to continue your work in the world. **Amen**
Father, we offer ourselves to you as a living sacrifice through Jesus Christ our Lord. Send us out in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory.

Notices

Hymn My Heart and Voice I Raise

**My heart and voice I raise, To spread Messiah's praise;
Messiah's praise let all repeat;
The universal Lord, By whose almighty word
Creation rose in form complete.**

A servant's form he wore, And in his body bore

Our dreadful curse on Calvary:

**He like a victim stood, And poured his sacred blood,
To set the guilty captives free.**

**But soon the Victor rose Triumphant o'er his foes,
And led the vanquished host in chains:
He threw their empire down, His foes compelled to own,
O'er all the great Messiah reigns.**

**With mercy's mildest grace, He governs all our race
In wisdom, righteousness, and love:
Who to Messiah fly Shall find redemption nigh,
And all his great salvation prove.**

**Hail, Saviour, Prince of peace! Thy kingdom shall increase,
Till all the world your glory see;
And righteousness abound, As the great deep profound,
And fill the earth with purity!**

Dismissal

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always. **Amen.**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord: **In the name of Christ. Amen.**

Sermon The Sheep and the Goats

Introduction

I used to work with a fellow in the Navy whose favourite criticism was to call you a goat. 'You're just a goat', he'd say whenever he disagreed with you, or 'Ignore them, they're just a bunch of goats', whenever some policy came out he didn't like. Being in the Navy, he also had a number of other colourful goat related comments I won't repeat in this polite company.

I lost contact with this fellow for a number of years, and only I saw him last year after he'd been promoted to rear admiral. I expressed my surprise that he'd made it so far, and all he said was 'I didn't think so either, I'm such a goat'

Goats don't seem to get much good press, either today or in Jesus day, and at least not compared to their woolly cousins, the sheep. From Jesus's parables, you might think that the primary differences are that sheep keep getting lost, and goats should be concerned whenever a wayward son comes home!

Nevertheless, today's gospel reading says that when Jesus returns, he will divide the people from all nations into two groups, one characterised as goats, and the other as sheep. Today I want to look at what he means by this, and what it means for us. Ultimately, I want us to ask ourselves the same question my colleague asked - are you a goat?

Jesus will return

But first, I want to look at Jesus' return.

We've talked about Jesus's return in our series from 1 Thessalonians. You will remember that Paul said, 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 (NIV) *we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.* ¹⁶ *For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.* ¹⁷ *After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.*

Paul doesn't talk much about the judgement that Jesus will bring when he returns in this passage, but by referring to the second coming as the day of the Lord, he is alluding to numerous other passages that associate the day of the Lord with the final judgement. For example, in Isaiah 2, Isaiah says in the last days, God will judge the nations

More on the judgement later, but the first point I want to make is that Jesus will return. While Jesus was walking with his disciples, he told them Matthew 24:30-31 (NIV) *"Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory. ³¹ And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.*

Jesus will return, in power and great glory, and the entire world will recognise him. Of that there is no doubt. He has delayed his coming until just the right time. 2 Peter tells us: 2 Peter 3:8-10 (NIV) ⁸ *But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. ¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief.*

Jesus is patient, but will return when the appointed number have been saved, when all who will be saved have reached repentance.

Jesus will judge

When Jesus does return, he will bring judgement. 1 Thessalonians talks about all who are saved being caught up with Jesus, the elect being gathered from the four winds. 2 Peter 3:7 describes it as the judgement and destruction of the ungodly. Matthew, of course, talks about the separation of the sheep and the goats, with the sheep gaining eternal life, and the goats taken to eternal punishment. These are all different aspects of the one thing, the final judgement.

There is no doubt that this judgment will happen either. Even since sin came into the world with Adam and Eve with the serpent in Genesis 3, the Bible has looked forward to a day where sin will be destroyed. Gen 3:17 talks of a day when the offspring of woman will crush the serpent's head. Genesis 3:15 (NIV) *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."* God tells the serpent. The last days that Jesus is talking about is the fulfilment of this prophecy, when the serpent's head is crushed and evil is destroyed, returning the world to the way it was supposed to be, the way it was in Eden before sin entered.

The sheep are blessed.

In the judgement when Jesus returns, the entirety of human kind, every single human being since Adam and Eve will face judgement. Those who have died will be raised back to life and will be judged first, and those who are still alive when Jesus returns will be judged next.

Our passage this morning says: ³⁴ "Then the King (that is Jesus) will say to those on his right (the sheep), 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ 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, ³⁶ 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.'

We need to be careful when we read this passage (as we always do when we read scripture) to ensure that our understanding is consistent with the rest of scripture. It would be very easy to think that the sheep are judged by God to be sheep because they gave the hungry something to eat, the thirsty something to drink, the stranger an invitation, the naked clothing, care to the sick and they visited prisoners. It is easy to think this, and these are certainly activities that I think we would all agree that all Christians should participate in, but are they the basis of God's judgment? Are we saved because we do these things?

The Bible consistently says that we are not saved because of the works we do. Perhaps the most well known verse on this subject is Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV) *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith —and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.*

This makes absolutely clear that we are not saved by works - not by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked or visiting the prisoners. No, we are, we only can be, saved by God's grace through faith, as a gift of God.

So what is Matthew saying when Jesus talks about the sheep doing these works?

I think a clue is found by reading on, in Ephesians 2:10 (NIV) *For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. We are created to do good works, or perhaps even saved to do good works.*

These good works are a response to our salvation. Many put down the early church's success, its attractiveness to outsiders, its explosive growth in numbers, to the care Christians gave to the widows and the fatherless, the under-privileged in society and the powerless (including women and children.) There is probably much truth to this (although I also personally think that God has a bit to do with it!)

Nevertheless, Christians, should be, and certainly were in the first century, a people characterised by good works, good deeds that they performed in response to their salvation, and not in order to gain it.

Therefore, consistent with the rest of scripture, in Matthew, Jesus is saying that God separates out the sheep from the goats, and that the sheep are characterised by good deeds - but they were sheep (that is saved) before they did the good deeds, not in order to be saved.

This should lead us to ask ourselves if we are characterised by good deeds in response to our salvation. If we aren't, we should examine our hearts closely, we should consider our salvation, and whether we have truly repented before God in faith, accepting Jesus' death and resurrection on our behalf. If we are convicted of this, then we should examine our lives, seeking out the good deeds that God has prepared in advance for us, and do them in response to our salvation.

Sort out your salvation first, and the good deeds will follow, as will the eternal life that Jesus promises.

The goats are cursed

Jesus then talks about the other side of judgment:

⁴¹ "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. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ 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.'

⁴⁴ "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

⁴⁵ "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

This side of judgment often raises an outcry from non-Christians, even atheists, who claim that they are just as charitable, that their good deeds are at least as good as those of Christians (and to all outwards appearances, and to the church's shame, they are often right!) And if that is true, why doesn't the God (that they happen not to believe in) save them, or at least not threaten them with eternal punishment?

Again, we need to interpret scripture consistently with the rest of scripture. As we said with the sheep, the goats are not judged on the basis of the good deeds they have done. They are judged on the basis of how they have fallen short of God's perfect standard.

As Roman's 3 reminds us: Romans 3:23 (NIV) *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* They may have some good deeds, but everyone (short of Jesus) also has bad deeds, bad words, bad thoughts that drag them down. No number of good deeds can outweigh our bad deeds, or rebellion against God our creator. No one can stand before God on the judgement day and claim to have met God's perfect standard on their own merit, and so we all deserve eternal punishment.

Yes, we all deserve eternal punishment unless we stand before God not relying on our own merit, but relying on the merit of someone who perfectly met God's perfect standard, and has taken our punishment upon themselves. Only one person has ever managed this, Jesus Christ, who Paul is referring to in 2 Corinthians 5:21 (NIV) *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

So the goats might do good deeds, but in God's eyes do not, cannot meet, the sinless perfection of Jesus his son, and are separated from the God they don't believe in, and all the good things of his creation for all eternity. Sheep rely on the sinless Jesus taking the punishment for their sins upon himself, becoming righteous in God's eyes, and living with him in eternal life.

And so, as my friend asked at the beginning of the sermon, even though he never understood the question: **What are you, a goat? Or you a sheep?**

Even if you are a goat, by God's grace He can change you. Just ask me how after the service. Even if you aren't sure, come and talk to me - the consequences are too dire not to be sure. Amen