



**Woolly Wanderers
or Gregarious Goats?
19 November 2017
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Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Ephesians 1:15-23

Matthew 25:31-46

http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html

Last year I was given a wonderful Christmas present from an old friend. I opened up the card to be told I had been given 12 cheeky chicks! I was delighted, but, lacking any great animal husbandry skills, was even more delighted they were in fact going to a family in Sri Lanka to help improve their livelihood. But I was never quite sure if the cheeky chick reference was meant to be telling me something?!

You too may have received or given such gifts through various aid organisations. I notice this year there is the possibility of giving your friends a 'woolly wanderer' or a 'gregarious goat' – again it may have your friends guessing as to what you think of them!

In this land we think we know a bit about sheep and goats, even if we're city dwellers, we go to the A&P Show and think we know enough to tell them apart! But when I have been travelling in Israel and the Sinai, we saw a number of herds of sheep and goats all mixed up together, and in fact looking very similar, with long coats, ears and tails, and with all sorts of colours and spots and stripes. And apparently at the end of the day the shepherd does indeed separate the goats from the sheep, as the less hardy goats need to be kept warm inside at night.

That made me think again about our Gospel reading. We can think it might be quite clear cut as to who are the sheep and who are the goats in the story, who are the righteous and who the negligent, but maybe it's not that simple.

Perhaps the reality is that there is good and evil, righteousness and neglect in each community, within each person.

It was Solzhenitsyn who said, "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them.

But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."

Scholars often ask questions about the picture Jesus gives us here of final judgement. When Jesus says 'all the nations' are gathered before the Son of Man, **who** does that mean? **Who** is being divided into sheep and goats? And then **who** are the ones on the receiving end, **who** either receive the ministrations of the sheep, or the neglect of the goats?

The Hebrew Scriptures normally have it that the nations, the Gentiles, will be judged on how they treat the people of Israel, God's people. So this could be an assessment a bit like Paul's in Romans 2 where he says that Gentiles, who do not have the law of Moses, will yet be judged on the basis of whether they live according to the dictates of their conscience, prompting them to live a life of righteousness and good deeds.

Some would move on from there and say that Matthew in his gospel is now affirming that Jesus will judge **all** the nations, that is Gentiles, Jews, non-Christians, everybody, on the basis of how they treat **Christians**, those whom Jesus calls here 'those who are members of my family'. We can see how that could have been an encouragement to Matthew's community, particularly if some were indeed suffering poverty or imprisonment because of their faith, and wondering when justice would come. And we know that this is still the reality for not a few Christians in our world today, the suffering body of Christ.

Others will respond and say rather that Jesus is referring here to caring for **all** those of the **human** family, **all** God's children, not just Christians. One of my favourite lines from the book and musical *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo is this: 'to love another person is to see the face of God'. This passage is and should be a constant challenge to us to see the face of Jesus in the hungry, thirsty, foreign, naked, sick and imprisoned, to become ever more conscious of the face of Jesus in those we serve in Christ's name.

Some more 'Protestant' scholars have struggled with the interpretation of this passage, as it feels like what is being espoused here is a 'salvation by good works' mentality, rather than salvation by faith in Christ alone. But we need to remember that one of Matthew's key emphases **is** the living out of our faith in good deeds, not just hearing the word but **doing** it.

And we need to take this passage not in isolation, but rather in the context of the larger gospel story. It is followed immediately by the

Passion narrative of Jesus' death for us, the suffering that comes before the vindication of the resurrection and ascension to the throne of Christ's glory. The heavenly Judge is first found judged by humanity.

Perhaps the challenge to us at this time of year is still taking the risk of reaching out to others and getting involved in other people's lives. When we're busy or weary at year's end, it is very easy for our focus to shift back in on ourselves, for us to hunker down and look to our own survival and self-preservation, to look out for number one, rather than look over the fence to see how those around us are doing.

As those of us who were at the Exchange the other evening heard from our city missionaries and other speakers, there is a lot of hard work and cost to that ongoing involvement and commitment to caring for the lost, last and least of our community. There is a cost in putting our agendas and diaries aside to give time to those whom God brings across our path, whether it's just a one-off conversation in the street of which we will never know the consequences; or travelling with others for the long haul, those whom we get to know and love, warts and all, just as we are loved and known in this place.

There is a cost and risk in taking steps of responsibility and leadership too. As we reflect on the changes in government in our country and our world over recent weeks, we need to be praying for those in leadership in difficult times. The words of God through the prophet Ezekiel are deeply challenging to those in leadership positions, whether in the state or in business or in the church. We can hear the frustration of God who must step in to shepherd his people, because the shepherds, the kings and religious leaders, have been fleecing and ravaging the flock! It's interesting the verb "diakonein" from which we get our word 'deacon' is there in our gospel (v. 44) today – you took care of me, you ministered to me, you served me as a deacon does.

What can give us encouragement as we seek to minister to Christ in those we meet? I think the reminder from Ezekiel that **God** is the chief shepherd, who promises to bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. The reminder too that the Son of Man who is the **Judge** of our Gospel reading, is also the **Good Shepherd** who knows each of his sheep by name, who calls us to follow him, and rescues us when we go astray. The Shepherd has found us, and as Thomas Merton put it, all we have to do is to stay found. May we stay found in Christ. Amen.