

Our Shepherd-King's Final Judgement: Sheep or Goats?

Thirty-fourth Sunday of the Year – Cycle A – November 22, 2020 Christ the King

Readings: Ezek 34:11-12, 15-17; 1 Cor 15:20-26, 28; Mt 25:31-46

“The king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’” (Mt 25:40)

Prologue: Just, justice, justly and judgement—are words that appear approximately a hundred times in the Bible; more in the OT rather than in the NT, where Jesus and the evangelists replace justice and judgement with words like love, mercy and compassion. So also, for the pastoral people of the Palestine of Jesus’ time, shepherd, sheep and goats were images that evoked many meanings. Today’s reflections could revolve around the images of judgement, sheep and goats.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. *The Judgement of the King:* In the Bible, judgement is done by both, God and human beings: patriarchs, kings, judges, prophets, elders, rabbis, heads of families and so on. Some of these are just, others unjust. Those who just unjustly will finally be judged by God, who is patient and compassionate; yet, God must also deliver judgements to ensure that good prevails over evil; right, over wrong; life, over death. ‘*Judgement as separation*’ is one of the favourite biblical themes; as for example, during the harvest when the good is separated from the bad (Joel 3:12-13; Mt 13:36-43; Rev 14:14-20). John the Baptist too portrays Jesus as a harvester whose “winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Lk 3:17). Today’s gospel passage is Matthew’s great scene of the Last Judgement when: “All the nations will be gathered before him ...” (v.32). Here, Christ is seen as a King who judges everyone at the end of time by initiating a *process of separation*, just as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. In the Hebraic imagination, there is a close connection between the images of king and shepherd presumably since the most famous king, David, was a shepherd. Anyway, the image of shepherd was widely used to refer to anyone in positions of governance who would, at some point, evaluate those governed so as *to separate* the good from the bad.
2. *Sheep and Shepherd, Goats and Scapegoats:* The sheep are placed on the right side of the King, the favoured side, while the goats are put on the left. It was very common for shepherds in the Palestine of Jesus’ time to separate sheep from goats. During the day, the whole flock grazed together, but at night, the shepherd would separate sheep from goats because the goats needed shelter from the cold whereas the sheep, being hardy, could stay out. Sheep is the most frequently mentioned animal in the Bible with nearly 400 references including mentions of flock. Sheep were totally dependent on the shepherd for grazing, watering, shelter, protection and tending to injury, thus making the role of shepherd even more challenging. Consequently, good shepherds were able providers, guides, protectors and companions of sheep. In the Bible, goats are mainly associated with the sacrificial system—though, this is true for sheep and lambs, too—and more closely associated with sin and the need for atonement and forgiveness. On the annual ‘Day of Atonement’ the sins of the whole community would be confessed over the *scapegoat*’s head and then it would be driven out to the wilderness, symbolic of the casting away of the sins of the whole community (Lev 16:20-22). The general picture of goats is also of them being wild, leaping around and violent (Dan 8:5-8), as compared to the sheep: meek, vulnerable and ready to be led by their shepherd.

3. Besides the process of ‘*separation*’ in judgement stories, there is the element of ‘*shock*’ and ‘*surprise*’. This is very clear in the gospel passage where both, the righteous sheep and the accursed goats are surprised and shocked at their being commended and condemned, respectively. One must go back to the past two Sundays where those in positions of privilege—like the foolish virgins (Mt 25:1-13) and the third servant who received much, returned nothing (Mt 25:14-30)—are excluded from the celebration and thrown into the darkness, weeping. The shock and surprise of *both parties* is echoed in their question: “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry, thirsty, naked, helpless, naked, sick, imprisoned and cared—or, did not care—for you?” (vv.37-39; 44). To the many—when? when? when?—the King will point to the *least* members of his Kingdom-family; for, he had totally identified with them. Thus, in loving and serving them (their *neighbour*, in the traditional ‘corporal works of mercy’), they were loving and serving Him, King (God). All distinctions between God and neighbour disappear on the day of judgement and separation. We must remember that: the righteous loved and served without conditions and calculations, while had the accursed loved and served, they’d have done so with caution, conditions and calculations. The latter will hear those dreaded words: “Get away! I do not know you!” (Mt 7:23; 25:12). Love is genuine only when it is reckless self-giving: with neither conditions nor calculations.

Connecting the 1st and 2nd Readings and Psalm to the Theme:

- The first reading introduces the kingship theme with shepherd imagery. Judah’s pre-Exilic kings were false shepherds who fleeced their flock, fed themselves, led the sheep astray and failed to protect them. Thus, henceforth, God will shepherd his people (v.15), and “look for the lost one, bring back the stray, bandage the wounded and make the weak strong.” The last verses reiterate the judgment theme: “I will feed them with justice. ... I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats” (vv.16b,17).
- In the second reading, Paul corrects the dualistic conception—separation between body and soul, flesh and spirit—that was infecting the Corinthian community influenced by Greek dualistic philosophy that considered soul and spirit supreme and despised the body. This view goes against the incarnational view of Christianity and the ‘resurrection of the body’. The passage gives a roadmap of history when, after recognizing, loving and serving the Incarnate Word of God, Jesus, in the suffering bodies of his ‘*least*’ brethren: hungry, thirsty, imprisoned, sick, etc., we shall die and then “all will be made alive in Christ” (v.22). At the end of times, Christ will “hand over the kingdom to God the Father,” (v.24) so that “God may be all in all” (v.28).
- The ‘shepherd psalm’ is a response to the first reading—a messianic prophesy pointing to Jesus, the Good Shepherd (Jn 10) who will know, love, serve and save his flock.

Quotes to reflect upon:

- Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti* (n.235): “Those who work for tranquil social coexistence should never forget that inequality and lack of integral human development make peace impossible. If we have to begin anew, it must always be from the *least* of our brothers and sisters.”
 - C. S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce*: “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done’. All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek, find. To those who knock, it is opened.”
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