

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
Psalm 95
Matthew 25:31-46

Pointless love

Today's semi-parable of the coming of the Son of Man in judgement is a familiar one to most of us. Through this story we have learned to see the need of Jesus himself in the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, those imprisoned. This lesson comes at the climax of Jesus' teaching in Matthew's gospel, which makes the point all the more point-y. Let us hear the call to love again, today.

I want, however, to draw attention to something about the parable which is less obvious simply because the moral lesson is so obvious: those who are commended for doing the good did that good in ignorance that the needy they served were, in some sense, "Jesus". In this the blessed "sheep" of the parable are different from us, because we have heard the parable, which creates for us a motivation alien to the blessed in the story. This has the potential to distort our sense for what we are called to do and to be.

Put most simply, the moral and theological problem is this: to love someone else because they are, in a sense, Jesus, is not to love them because they are themselves worthy of love; it is to love something other than what we think they manifestly are. This is where things go wrong, for in this way we try to perfume the stink of needy humanity. While the "lovers" of the parable love and serve those in need simply because they are in need, our knowledge of the parable may cause us to "add" something to those we are to love. In this we seek to make them more "lovable": Why help the needy? Because it is really Jesus we serve, and surely we want to serve him, if not these themselves.

The problem is that to make something "more loveable" is to turn it into a means to an end. It is to turn it more into what I need. So far as our reading of the parable is concerned, the "end" here might be our own salvation: seeing Jesus in others makes us more likely to serve them in their need, putting us in a better light before God. More broadly, the end in mind might be some other seemingly laudable but ulterior motive – perhaps the growth of the church – or just something salacious.

But people not means to ends; they are, properly, an end in themselves. We might risk to say that this is the basis of divine law, and that violations of the law are instances of people – or God – being made a means to an end. What are idolatry, blasphemy, murder, adultery and theft other than strategies to get to something other than God or the violated person?

This kind of relating to God and to others is certainly a live option for us. But we are to deal with each other without manipulation, for this is how God deals with us, first of all in the person of Jesus. The life of Jesus himself was no means to an end. If he was truly human – truly one of us – his purpose was none other than to live a life of love, for that is our purpose, however badly we might sometimes manage it. Atonement theories which propose that the life of Jesus was strategic, that he "had" to die for a reason different from the rest of us, diminish the freedom of God and diminish Jesus' own humanity. They diminish God's freedom by imposing an economy of salvation which

ties God's hands, such that God "has to" do something to achieve salvation other than simply determine that we be saved. Such theories also diminish Jesus' humanity by turning his life into a means to an end other than his own self – his own liveliness, his own enjoyment of God and neighbour.

In the same way, our love of God – if we do – is not a means to an end. Again, we look to Jesus here. Jesus does not love God "in order that" – in order that he lived a charmed life, in order to secure life after death, or for another other end we might imagine God might facilitate. Living in God, living for those around us, is the end of it all.

We could, then, overstate the matter – although only slightly – by saying that love has no "point", no purpose, other than the life together of the lovers. The difference between the sheep and the goats in the parable is the difference between the beloved as an end in herself and the beloved as a means to an end which finally leaves her behind.

[ASIDE: For those of you who are still wondering what on earth I was talking about last week, the difference between the sheep and the goats in the parable is the difference between "We did not know God was there but loved anyway" and "We knew God could not be there, so did not bother to love". The "sheep" lived and loved "as if God were not there".]

And this brings us to the end – the dead end – of all love which has is aimed at anything other than the beloved. Love which is manipulative, which does not love the person him- or herself, finally renders us alone. We surpass the beloved, stepping on or over or through him to something else, some vision of what we should be or have. But is it lonely. We have left the one who thought herself loved behind. And God is not there, either; for God loves persons, not other ends achieved through persons. This is eternal punishment: life alone.

As archaic as the language is, the church speaks of Jesus as king not because this is a quality which resides in Jesus for himself, but because his is an active kingship, and active reign, which does what it commands: loves without ends, that our love might be without end. We gather around a table at which is served the signs of a life manipulated, a life turned into a means to some end, and so discarded and left behind. To what end does God say that these signs can heal? To no end but us ourselves. God's desire for us draws us together, love opening up the possibility of love.

Being, then, drawn together in this way, let us love without ends, be this in the case of the fellowship of the community gathered here today, the work of Hotham Mission, your love for your parents or children or spouse or neighbours or colleagues or some unhappy soul sitting out his day on the footpath. In this way we do not only love Jesus but love like Jesus does. What else does the world need?
