

Reign of Christ
22/11/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Daniel 12:1-4a
Psalm 100
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46

An end to radical uncertainty

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

It is fitting on this last Sunday in the Liturgical year that each of our readings should be about ‘endings’. But a warning. The nuances that the word ‘end’ throws up are crucial. One meaning of ‘end’ is that of a simple chronological termination. The parable of the sheep and the goats is certainly an end in just this sense, coming as it does for Matthew as the concluding words of the teaching of Jesus.

But there is another, and much more significant, sense of the word ‘end’. And that is, ‘end’ as the disclosure of ultimate meaning, a final illumination. Such is this parable. But we will soon discover that it will be only an *apparent* ultimate disclosure. We say ‘apparent’ because we will confront a dramatic reconfiguring of the precarious status of the sheep and the goats when the next three chapters unfold.

I fear that if your experience is anything like mine you will have heard in your lifetime any number of sermons on this text. Perhaps some were not as edifying as they might have been. This is a text much loved by preachers and even by secular humanists as a piece of ethical teaching urging concern for victims of famine and other oppression – food, drink, clothing, prison visits and the like. We are at home here, and God forbid that we should deny their necessity for the needy, even though we surely do not need any persuasive text for such altruism.

But the problem is that this is not the real concern of the parable. Rather, its point is to establish *that in the unlikely figure of Jesus, the accredited precursor of a final judgment of all history is being revealed*. This is why we hear that “*all the nations*” shall be gathered before him, and “*he will separate, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats...*” We might take cheerful note in passing of what may well escape us: that it is the nations who are being separated, not individuals.

Perhaps it all becomes clearer when we take account of a text composed some two hundred years earlier than our parable - the book of Daniel, which is chronologically one of the last books of the Hebrew scriptures to be written. Since Matthew is writing a gospel for Jewish, not Gentile, Christians, he finds this text of Daniel to be inescapable, anticipating as it does the decisive end point of Israel’s chequered history. So, Daniel writes:

“At the time of the end, many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt”. For Matthew, ‘sheep and goats’ puts an earthy spin on this ambiguous horizon.

Assisted by our parable, some later unrepentant Christian theology continued to endorse this original Old Testament ‘fall of the curtain’. It called this divisive allocation a ‘double predestination’: the ushering in of a final determination of those who are ‘in’

and those who are 'out'. The point, however, is that although Matthew retains this dual destiny, he understands that this hitherto predicted time of the end is *about to take place in a quite unanticipated way*.

Matthew's first modification of Daniel's expectation is to assert that *'the end'* will not be a separation *beyond* history; it will be decided in the present everyday time and place of mundane food, drink, clothing, visitation. To this end, the entire human community frolic in this apparently disarming rural sheep and goats environment. The imagery of the parable is seductive. During the daytime, sheep and goats are all mixed. But in the evening light, even though sheep are white and goats are black, they are indistinguishable to every onlooker - except of course to the Shepherd. The parable obviously intends to confuse all of us. We are all equally indistinguishable in the living of our lives. Which is why, incidentally, the same Matthew's Jesus tells us to our healing: "*Judge not that you be not judged*". The point is that, for Matthew, the bewildering fate of sheep and goats has become an illustration of Daniel's life or death 'last day awakening'. But now there is a specific criterion: acceptance or rejection *in the present* of all that Jesus has been, and has taught, in his ministry.

The tragedy is that generations have turned all this into 'a Last Judgement' at the day of individual death. In Medieval times its accompanying grotesque imagery of flames and pitchforks has rightly ceased to be at all compelling. It is equally plausible that even 'judgement' as a concept has now met the same contemporary demise. At the very least, it is almost certain that, when we hear the word 'judgement', we are likely to have in mind imagery which takes its origin from the world of the ancient Greeks, by way of Egypt. What did these ancients believe? They thought of judgement awaiting life's end as a set of scales, weighing up the good and the bad. So powerful is this image that it is difficult for us not to imagine that Jesus is offering the same fate at the end - pass or fail, sheep or goat. This is scarcely good news! Who knows which side of the balance will carry the day? Have I done enough? Am I a sheep or am I goat, or perhaps even more poignantly, is he or she a sheep or a goat?

Jesus certainly concludes his teaching with division. But see how our notion of judgement is about to be transformed as the next three chapters unfold when, from this point on, we travel with this 'teacher of the end' on the way to his end at Golgotha.

And with just this emerging catastrophe, we come to the second and crucial modification of the end which Matthew employs. For it is in what is about to unfold in Jerusalem that true judgement will be enacted, remembering that the word Jerusalem means 'vision of peace'. Not with the Greeks, at some uncertain human end, not even with our imperfect distribution of food, drink and clothing. But right there, and right now!

Who would have supposed that two planks of wood will replace a set of scales as the instrument of judgement? And that the One hanging on it will be the same Judge of the parable - *who is now himself here being judged?* And that means: judged *in our place*; a king of the nations crowned - with all *their* thorns - on a cross. A Son of man coming to sit on *this* throne; glory camouflaged as helplessness; an end, inaugurating a new beginning.

What is being revealed here is not only that shepherd and sheep have become one, but - even more inconceivable - that on this despicable 'throne', the Lamb of God has effectively been transformed into - of all things - a goat. And with this transformation, only here, and only now, will the word 'judgement' usher in a radically 'other' world - now not a dark, threatening, future world of an individual 'in or out' or 'up or down'

destiny, but a shining world of cosmic forgiveness, the Easter of creation for all the nations, the final restoration of all things.

In a few minutes we will be invited to confess together these words in the Creed: *“He will come in glory to judge the living and the dead”*. What image will you entertain? Will you see a set of scales, or will it be two pieces of timber? That is to say, will you have rejoiced that hanging there all double predestination weighed on a set of scales is over and done with? That in the crucified Christ this single judgement to life has *already* been enacted?

Centuries ago the French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, stretched out our history’s protracted interval between ‘then’ and ‘now’ when he proposed that *“Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world”*. This arresting declaration simply affirms this one predestination to life, now *moved back* from some insecure future beyond - precisely in order to hang everything for all time with the crucified One as the Judge judged in our place: on a death that brings life; forgiveness for the healing of all the nations; a crucified Lamb for the sake of all goats.

The truth is that most people today have no idea what it is to be Christian – not only because they stop reading at Chapter 25 with Jesus “the teacher”, but, even more disastrously, because the Greeks have won. So, let this last day of the Christian calendar speak to us all. It says simply this. The whole journey which began at Advent, now coming to a close, has been about getting rid of Greek judgement. To this end, and to mix the metaphor, let ‘scales’ literally fall from our eyes as we take today’s Epistle to heart. And as a prayer of the Church, may it become not simply a domestic petition, but a universal intercession on behalf of the fractured - already judged - nations of our world:

“I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ will give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the (founded) hope to which he has called you.”
