

Psalm 95
Matthew 25:31-46

Pointless love

It is easy to turn love into a means to an end – a means to getting what we want, a means of keeping the peace, a means of impressing God. The love of the gospel, however, is pointless.

Today's semi-parable of the coming of the Son of Man in judgement is familiar 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 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. This creates for us a motivation alien to the blessed ones in the story.

This can distort our sense for what we are called to do and to be. Most simply, the problem is this: to love others 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. In this way, we try to perfume the stink of needy humanity – of each other in our various needs, of the overwhelming need of the poor, the angry, the sick, the ruthless. While the "lovers" of the parable love and serve those in need simply because they *are* in need, *our* knowledge of the parable tempts us to "add" something to those we are to love. We are tempted to read the parable as wanting to make others more lovable. Why help the needy? Because it is really *Jesus* we serve, and surely we want to serve *him*, if not these bothersome or contemptible people 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.

But people are not means to ends. People are, properly, an end in themselves. We might risk saying 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? What is indiscriminate shooting or bombing of an enemy but a means to an end beyond those killed? What is political misinformation or pornography but a means to an end other than those misled or abused?

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, 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 reduce God's freedom by imagining God's hands to be tied by some economy of salvation, such that God "has to" do something to achieve salvation. And such theories 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. Jesus here is a coin God spends not for Jesus' sake but for ours.

In the same way, to love God is not a means to an end. Again, we look to Jesus here. Jesus does not love God so that he might live 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 – the purpose – of it all. This is what *we* are for, this is enough.

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. As we read it now, 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.

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. Here we would surpass the beloved, stepping on or over or through him to something else, some vision of what we should be or have. But this would be lonely life. In this we would leave 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 the eternal punishment of the parable: 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 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 symbols we call "body" and "blood" because they are 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. Love makes us here, again, and that is all. God's desire for us draws us together, love opening up the possibility of love. There is no further purpose than being made in love, and then beginning to love, and seeing what happens next.

Being, then, drawn together in this way, let us love without ends, without purpose, without ulterior motive, 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 not only love Jesus as the parable proposes, but love like Jesus does.

What else does the world need now but love, such love?
