**22nd March 2015**

**Matthew 25. 31-46**

We all have a tendency to sort people out into groups. Who is in and who is out. Who is voting Tory, who is voting Labour etc. Who are the people I like, and who do I dislike?

In J.K. Rowling’s world of Harry Potter, where the aim of education was to learn the extent of your spiritual powers and how to control them, first year students were assigned by The Sorting Hat to one of four houses, each defined by a paramount virtue:  bravery; hard work; cleverness; or ambition.  So the sorting, by which they had already been chosen to attend school, continued within the school, affecting everything from coursework to sport to alumni battles for direction of the school, to cosmic contention over good and evil.

And a glance at the reality show of the nightly news shows us all these things, though with far more confusion about the forces of good and evil and about our own part in the works of sorting.

Discussions on the Lent Course and indeed on the Christianity Explored Course have touched on the issue of judgement, justice, mercy, heaven and hell. They all come up in our bible passage today, Jesus’ parable about the sheep and the goats.

If you have been doing the Lent Course based on the novel and musical Les Miserables you will have been discussing the different characters namely Valjean and Javert. Valjean the ex-convict has experienced mercy and grace and been transformed by the experience. Javert the police officer is obsessed with the law and anyone who breaks it is guilty with no hope of redemption.

Justice is one of the most profound longings of the human race. If there is no justice then deep within ourselves we know that something is out of joint. Justice is hard to define and harder still to put into practice; but that has never stopped humanity and societies seeking it, praying for it and working to find ways of doing it better. The victims of the Hillsbororugh Tragedy waited 26 years for justice to be done but this week the police finally admitted it was their decision to open the gate that caused the crushing and death of 96 people. Justice matters.

And justice doesn’t mean simply punishing wickedness though that is regularly involved. It means bringing the world back into balance. Central to Christian and Jewish belief is that this passionate longing for justice comes from God. We believe that God will ultimately do justice on a world wide scale in the way that say, the International Court of Justice in The Hague in the Netherlands, can only dream of doing.

There are many scenes of judgement and justice being done in scripture. Here is one of them.

Jesus’ teaching in this passage tells how, when God’s reign comes in its fullness, the nations will be separated in the same way a shepherd separates sheep and goats. In Jesus’ day, flocks of sheep and goats together were common. Shepherds would count their animals at the end of the day, separating the goats, who were less hardy and needed to be kept warm, from the sheep. In the Hebrew Scriptures, sheep sometimes are an image of God’s people (for example, Psalm 100:3 and Isaiah 53:6). In the New Testament, the image of sheep often refers to those who follow Christ, the shepherd (for example, John 10:1–11 and Hebrews 13:20). On the day Christ reigns in full glory, Jesus says the nations will be separated based on whether they have fed the hungry ones, clothed the naked ones, and so forth. In this way Jesus announces the judgment of all nations, both Jewish and Gentile, according to how they have responded to the call to follow and serve Christ.

*This is the end of a series of parables in Matthew dealing with the Day of Judgement. We have seen I from the viewpoint of the Church (the bridesmaids), the leaders with responsibilities (the talents) and now those who live and de without knowing the revealed truth. A all these people of other faiths and none are gathered before the throne of God, it is shown to them how, in their human goodness and thoughtful service to others, they have unknowingly been serving the God of love and therefore belong to his kingdom whatever name they may have given it before. Of course the reverse is also true and it is not simply doing harm to others which marks out our rejection of God’s ways. It is the goodness we fail to do, the needs we do not notice and ignore. Such blindness works in opposition to the law of love and places us outside the kingdom . the separation of sheep and goats is not so much judgement and punishment as sorting out those already shown to belong to the kingdom of God by their life’s intent from those who are already shown to belong to the kingdom of darkness.*

Most commentators believe that when Jesus says *‘whatever you did or didn’t do for one of these my brothers, however insignificant, you did for me’* – he is talking about his followers. The criterion imposed for the judgement is therefore an interesting one. Everything hinges on the way in which those who are judged have treated the followers of Jesus. Instead of the nation’s being judged on how they have treated Israel which some contemporary Jewish writings envisaged, Jesus, consistently with his whole definition of God’s people around himself, declares that he will himself judge the world on how it has treated his renewed Israel.

Matthew places this parable just before the Passion of Christ where Jesus would be hungry, thirsty, naked, a prisoner. Most of the followers of Jesus would endure the same treatment. This parable would have been a great encouragement to them that their older brother, Jesus, is already ruling the world and taking note of what they suffer. This judgement is an opportunity for vindication.

People often speculate how God will judge the nations, especially those who have not heard of the gospel of Christ or those who reject Christ. Maybe this parable gives a clue?

The vivid imagery in this parable may make many cringe. This judge seems harsh. Put the parable in context. If you were on the receiving end of violent torture and death because you were a follower of Jesus – you would cry out for justice and punishment of the perpetrators. But interpret the parable in the context of the whole of Jesus life and ministry, his death and resurrection. He came to judge – to put right what was wrong – but in a compassionate and merciful way – seeking the salvation of the world. Redemption is his business.

I would argue that if you believe in freedom you believe in allowing people the option of even if they were staring Jesus Christ in the face would still choose not to follow him. I believe in hell. I just don’t know who’s going there. And thank God it is not for me to know. Mother Teresa once said, ‘when we get to heaven, it may be full of surprises’ Jesus affirms that in this passage.

I know the way to heaven so that’s what I want to share about – Easter will remind us that Jesus says he is the resurrection and the life.

I’m not so sure when we got so hell obsessed. Jesus talks about it some, but not nearly so much as the kingdom of God. But his accounts of hell are interesting.

Jesus’s biggest hell sermons are about a rich man who doesn’t care for the beggar outside his gate (Luke 16) and then there is this one about how God will separate the sheep from the goats according to how we care for the least among us on earth. Jesus’ hardest hellfire sermon is in Matthew 23 and it is targeted at the religious elite, the moral gatekeepers of society: ‘you snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? And of course his most aggressive act was turning over tables in the temple. Interesting.

But the gospel is good news. John 3.16 is that cornerstone verse for many people’s faith god so loved the world that he gave his only son so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. But the next verse goes on: for God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. That sound like good news. God is more interested in saving than condemning. So a thief on the cross next to Jesus with his last breath can ask Jesus for a place in his kingdom and Jesus can say today you will be with me in paradise.

Sorting is a necessary part of this life, a part of identity formation, even an aspect of love.  But it is not a great image of the kingdom:  a place for some and not others.  The welter of other images Jesus gives us for the kingdom – the great and sheltering tree – leavened flour that feeds everyone – the wedding feast full of strangers – the meal of the all-embracing covenant – the fulfilment of Isaiah’s vision of the lion and lamb lying down together – the promise that all, all, will be lifted up with him, belie the Great Sorting, the image of Outer Darkness, and the idea of being Cast Away.

If there wasn’t a heaven or a hell I would still be committed to evangelism and sharing the way of Jesus. I want to recruit others to the task of transforming the world and changing it into what god wants it to be. A place where the hungry are fed, the thirsty are given a drink and those in prison are still treated as human beings despite their crimes.

When we call people to follow Jesus we ae offering them a call that will give ultimate meaning to their lives. . You are here to partner God in redeeming the world, in bringing love and justice.

The text can lead individuals or congregations to approach those who are in need as objects of their good works. They may, in this way, donate money or volunteer time all with an eye toward “us” helping “them.” What is key, therefore, is to recognize the encounter that is at the heart of the passage. In such action, we also encounter the living presence of Christ in one another. In other words, those who have plenty are as much in “need” (of God) as those with little.

I remember John Bell talking about the importance of touching those who are unwell as necessary for our wholeness and healing. He wondered if Jesus needed people to touch him because he had a need to be seen as fully human – one of us. They had a need to be healed. Both needed each other’s touch.

There is always a feeling of ‘us’ and ‘them’ when you offer acts of mercy and compassion. ‘We’ are doing a good work to ‘them’. But in some way ‘we’ too are receiving. It may be to relieve our guilt at having so much or being so comfortable. It may be our need to look good and kind and generous. It may be deeper needs. I know that when I have to visit people who are ill, or frail, or near the end of their lives I know my own fears about becoming like them one day. I fear being ill or dependent or near death. Yet as we encounter each other both of us are touched. Hopefully their need for understanding and companionship is met. I receive from seeing their courage and faith and by facing up to my own fears.

When we are confronted by poverty and disease we are confronted with our own disease of materialism and anxiety about our own comfort and security. In this way the church needs contact with the poor and suffering in order to cure its own disease and poverty of spirit.

John Bell told a story about a church in the United States that holds a meal once a month after worship and the whole community is invited. A third of the guests are wealthy and affluent, a third are black, and a third are homeless. He says the wealthy and affluent come because they recognise something is happening, the kingdom of God is present and they want to be part of it. The rich give to the poor but the poor also give to the rich in the relationships and conversations that happen around those tables.

The encounter with one another may lead to relationships. Acts of compassion may become experiences of God’s presence. As we see Christ present in other people, perhaps they will see Christ present in us as well.

Back to judgement: there are a growing number of people who have grown up in a pluralistic sort of world thinking ‘we need to be more inclusive of everyone. There is a beautiful side to that but I would argue it can also cheapen the things that make us different when we ask ‘why can’t we all get along?’

It is without doubt politically incorrect and exclusive to say that Jesus is the only way to God and will be judge of all. It is a statement worthy of Jeremy Clarkson and Top Gear. If there is to be justice, someone has to be judge. Christians make that claim about Jesus.

There are so many questions on this issue such as whether Christianity is the only way to God? Karl Barth the Protestant theologian was asked ‘are you saying that Christianity is the only way to God? And his answer was ‘No. No religion is the way to God. I’m saying that Jesus is the way to God’. There are many who say they have rejected Jesus but the more I talk with them I discover they are quite fond of Jesus. They are just not that crazy about the Christians and the church.

So this parable suggests that on Judgement Day there will be many people who weren’t in the Christian church who will discover that they did have a relationship with Christ and they hadn’t rejected Jesus at all.

Is it Jesus they have rejected or just some misinterpretation of him?

The Bible does say there is no other name under heaven whereby we can be saved, and there’s no way to avoid that.

Tony Camplo tells the story about Billy Graham the great evangelist who in 1987 went to a monastery in China to talk to some Buddhists. He found one monk deep in mediation, and felt led by the Spirit to go and talk to the man about Jesus. He opened the scripture and explained the way of salvation giving details about what Jesus had done on the cross and how through Christ we could know the peace of God and the assurance of everlasting life.

Billy Graham could sense that the Buddhist monk was taking all this in and there were tears in his eyes. Graham asked if he was willing to accept Jesus into his life. The monk looked back in dismay and said ‘accept him into my life? I would accept him, but you must understand that he is already in me. I didn’t know all the things that you have just told me but this Jesus you have been telling me about is within me. His Spirit has been confirming within me everything that you said and convincing me that these things are true. I would accept him, except that he is already within me.

Billy Graham wondered whether Christ had been alive in the monk before he got there. He would later say that his task was to bear witness. It’s the Holy Spirit’s task to convict and its God the Father’s task to judge.

Paul (Romans 2.13-15) suggests that God will make exception for those who never got the law of God but who nevertheless had something written on their hearts that made them do what god expected of them.

Campolo’s wife Peggy tells the story of how in heaven Peter is in charge of checking people in at the gate. Paul on the other hand, still the great administrator h had proven himself to be here on earth, is in charge of keeping track of the people in heaven. It disturbed him that he always found more people in heaven than Peter was admitting. This discrepancy greatly annoyed them both. Then one day, Paul came running to Peter and said, ‘I found out what’s been happening! It’s Jesus! He keeps sneaking people over the wall!’

The demands of justice, sorting out rights and wrongs, punishing those who have hurt others and broken the e law, is a fact of life and the bible suggests it will be a fact of the afterlife. But even though the church sometimes thinks it can determine who can and cannot get into heaven Jesus may be at work outside the church, loving people, lifting them into his kingdom.

As we approach the cross, as we celebrate Easter, we will be reminded that on the cross Justice will be kissed by mercy, the law will be in confrontation with grace – grace the love of God for those who are guilty and who do not deserve love and mercy. Its that Jesus again, sneaking people over the wall. Maybe even the goats?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

With help from

<http://biteintheapple.com/the-great-sorting/>

Nancy Rockwell

Tom Wright: Mathew for Everbody, SPCK

Shane Claiborne, Tony Camplo, Red Letter Christainty pub Hodder