

Matlock 22 November 2020

Call to Worship

Hello everyone it is lovely to be worshipping with you again. This morning we are going to be thinking about how we can be good sheep with the help of our heavenly shepherd. But to start with let's remind ourselves of how much we are loved with this active prayer.

From the top of my head

(Touch head)

to the tips of my toes;

(Touch toes)

from the lobes of my ears

(Touch ear lobes)

to the end of my nose;

(Touch nose)

from my back, to my front

(Turn round)

to my wiggly fingers,

(stretch out arms and wiggle fingers)

God loves me!

(jump up and down)

Amen

Jesus hands were kind hands

Now let's sing a song that we are all familiar with - Jesus hands were kind hands

But what does God expect of us?

Prepare a bag containing the following items (or pictures of them): bread, a bottle of water, a door, a scarf, a bandage. Show the items at the relevant points as you read the story.

We will explore this more during our service but as we will hear in our bible reading

God said:

I was hungry and you gave me food.

I was thirsty and you gave me a drink.

I was a stranger and you asked me in.

I needed clothes and you gave me something to wear.

I was sick and you looked after me.

And the people asked:

When did we feed you or give you a drink?

When did we ask you in and give you clothes?

When did we look after you?

And God said:

Whenever you looked after any of my people, you looked after me.

Prayers

Let's pray

We give you thanks, loving God, for:

those who have ministered to us in our time of need;

those who have visited us when we were ill;

those who have freed us from prisons of fear or lack of confidence;

those who have listened when we have needed to talk.

Bless them, encourage them in their ministries,

and strengthen us to follow their example of self-giving and compassion.

But We know only too well, Lord God,

that there are people we have not helped:

hungry, homeless, sick, in prison.

We know only too well our helplessness

in the face of so much suffering.

Forgive us if we have allowed our sense of guilt
to prevent us doing what we could.

Forgive us if we have failed to see you in the faces of those in need,
and thought that some were not worthy of our attention and help.

Forgive us if we have failed to recognise our complicity
in the circumstances that hurt and damage others.

As we are loved and cared for by you,

help us to love and care for one another,

to take delight in the responsibility you share with us,

and to find joy in every act of service

as we find ourselves ministering to Christ himself.

Amen.

Let's say the Lord's prayer together.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;

thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,

for ever and ever.

Amen.

When I needed a neighbor were you there

Our next hymn is a good lead in to this morning's readings, especially the second from Matthew.

Reading: Ezekiel 34: 11-16 & Matthew 25: 31-46

This morning's we have two readings both of which show God in the role of shepherd to his sheep.

Message

I hope you like my illustrations this morning, do you know who they all are?

I'm sure that Baird and Maisie probably do and most of us will recognise Shaun the sheep but do we know who the other two are?

Let me introduce you to Shaun's friends, Timmy the lamb and Shirley. Timmy is the baby of the flock and even if he's not always as innocent as he looks most of the time he needs looking after. Shirley is the laziest member of the flock. She is much larger than any of the other sheep and is so big that she needs to be pushed around. Although sometimes her size comes in useful as the rest of the flock can use her to hide behind or as a battering ram. She is mainly peaceful and like most of the characters in Shaun the sheep she is a figure of fun. Generally the flock work together to mainly under Shaun's leadership to get out of whatever trouble they've found themselves in and the shepherd is usually completely oblivious to their antics.

Not perhaps quite the way in which the sheep and shepherd are described in Ezekiel's passage?

In this passage God is presented as the shepherd of the flock and he is described as diligent and compassionate, someone who will gather together those that have been scattered and provide sustenance for them. Not at all like the shepherd in Shaun's stories. Nor like the rulers in Ezekiel's time who called themselves shepherds of their people but who Ezekiel, in the passage preceding this morning's reading, has called bad shepherds who fail to take their responsibilities to their flock seriously.

Unlike these earthly rulers and leaders, God takes his shepherding role seriously. He seeks the sheep, he gathers them together and feeds and nurtures them. In addition, he binds up and restores those who are injured or broken. But this image of a pastorally nurturing God is not complete in itself. There is judgement here too. The shepherd who knows his flock is aware that some have grown fat at the expense of others and Ezekiel makes it clear that God will judge those strong fat sheep that have preyed upon and scattered the others.

Now I've never had responsibility for looking after sheep so I don't know how realistic this image of sheep growing fat at the expense of others is. But I have looked after a friend's pig and piglets and with them it was certainly survival of the fittest when it came to feeding time. As soon as you appear with food they run towards you and the troughs, pushing the smaller piglets out of the way. There were two piglets who were significantly smaller than the rest of the bunch and they always got shoved out of the way and never got a look in. Having spotted it we held back a bit of the food and once the others were gobbling up the food from the trough we put it on the ground a little further away. The two who were stranded away from the trough spotted it and came over to get their share and after a few days learnt to hang back and wait to be fed separately. They soon caught up in size once they were getting their fair share of the food.

So this illustration has resonance for me and also makes me think that becoming fat at the expense of others can be just as easily done through thoughtlessness and self centeredness as well as deliberately. A challenging thought.

(pause)

Moving on to our gospel reading and we find Jesus also talking about himself as the Shepherd who will ultimately make judgements about his flock, in this case dividing those who are sheep from those who are goats. The act of separating feels like a frightening thing: a winnowing, an event that distinguishes and separates one from another. What is extraordinary in the conversation between the king and those on either side is that the separation has been made on the basis of what people did, and not what they believed about anything. Indeed, it is clear in the text that neither the sheep nor the goats recognised the king at all when they were either doing, or refusing to do, the acts of kindness and compassion. What counts when it comes to the winnowing is not the capacity to discern Jesus in the person in need, but the willingness to do the deed.

The question must be asked, therefore, is how much of the act done to the hungry and thirsty person must be a conscious act done to, or for, Jesus, and how much of it might be an instinctive action that we undertake in response to need, however and whenever we encounter it.

What the king in the story seems to praise is the instinctive response to human need and not the act done, or not done, on the basis of whether a person was deserving or not, nor even whether we were doing it consciously as our Christian duty. What matters is our openness to respond compassionately to human need. In this way the sheep who have spent their lives doing things that instinctively demonstrate their love for the shepherd by caring for others are separated from the goats who haven't. It's a hard divide but in real life is it as easy.

There is a creature that lives in the Himalayas, the Bharal, that looks like a cross between a sheep and goat and is in fact, neither. Jesus' description makes the judgement of God simple affair, good people to the right, sinners to the left. But in reality don't we suspect that the flock would not divide so easily but would contain a large number of these other creatures, neither sheep nor goats but sharing the characteristics of both?

Distinguishing between good and bad actions is different from distinguishing between good and bad people. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and so on are undoubtedly good actions to be encouraged. But no one group has the monopoly on good actions or indeed bad.

Who is to say whether we are sheep or goats?

How does God judge the true quality of our lives?

Does one good (or bad) deed negate all the rest or is it a question of balance?

Is it a lottery decided by the last action we commit before we are called to account?

None of these seem an adequate description of God's justice.

Looking at it further, the contrast seems to be between those who helped the needy and those who did not. But, as we have seen, we probably do not wholly identify with one group or the other. A more fruitful contrast to consider is in our reaction to the story. Does it leave us feeling guilty, or feeling encouraged? There is nothing new in telling us we should attend to the poor and distressed. But we can react to that command either in guilt at all we have failed to do, or with joy that even the least we do is of significance in God's kingdom.

Theatre-goers leaving after one performance were met by two people collecting for 'Children in Need'. Most gave willingly, happy to give to a cause that has demonstrated its ability to provide transforming support to many young people. However, one man, throwing a coin in the bucket, remarked angrily, 'That's it! I don't want anyone else asking me to give to "Children in Need"!'. It was clear he was giving out of a sense of guilt — but it gave him no pleasure. If only someone could have shared with him something of the joy of the sheep, who discovered that their small acts of kindness had ministered to Christ himself.

There is so much need and suffering in our world that it's easy to feel overwhelmed and guilty. Guilt can paralyse us into doing nothing, until we say with the goats, 'But, Lord, if we'd realised it was *you* we would have done something!' The good news of the parable is that every good act we do, however small it may seem, is a significant act in the eyes of God, as precious as if it were done for Christ himself.

Finally, the difficulty of knowing how to weigh good deeds against bad directs us to a vital point: in the end our righteousness does not depend on our good deeds but on Christ. The poor certainly need our help, but it is by the grace of God that we are saved.

Let's pray
Sometimes I am tired,
or I'm preoccupied with other demands.
Help me take time, help me make time, for kindness,
so that rush can take its lower place,
and kindness can rise up.
Because you had much to do —
but made time anyway.

Amen.

When I was lost you came and rescued me

Our final hymn might be new to you but I hope you enjoy it. At its heart it recognises what God has done for us, the depth of his love for us and our dependence on him.

Prayers of intercession

Conversation about who/what to pray for

Let us pray:
God our father,
our shepherd- and servant-king,
our Lord,
whose son is enthroned above all power and dominion
and encountered in the poorest of the poor:
we have so many ways
to describe our relationship with you.
Help us to learn from you
and to encounter you
in all the complexity of our human relationships.

We pray for all who exercise leadership in our world:
for politicians and heads of state,
for military commanders,
for leaders in industry, commerce, schools and colleges,
and in every sphere of life where human beings
have responsibility for one another.

Give them courage and integrity
to act with justice and compassion,
and to resist the pressures of expediency,
favouritism, or the desire for power
that so easily undermine good government.

We pray for the Church,
for renewed vision and understanding
of the leadership you desire for your people.
Help us discern when we can learn from the world,
and when you call us to be different from the world.

Give confidence to those whom you have called,
and empower them with your Spirit to lead and serve.

We pray for people who have suffered
because of bad leaders:
for those denied food, medicine or justice
because of corruption or incompetence;
for those who have been abused or exploited
by someone in authority over them.

Bring your healing and justice into every place
where trust has been damaged
and responsibility treated with contempt.

We pray for all who are most needy in our world,
and for those who work to help them.

We pray especially for those
who attract less attention and care
because their plight is unusual or repulsive,
or because they are perceived to be undeserving.

Give to us all such care and concern for others
that we may gladly respond
to do what is in our power.

Open our eyes to recognise Christ in all who need us,
and our hearts to receive his blessing
through their vulnerability.

Amen.

(Adapted from Roots for Churches Ltd)

Prayer for ourselves

God, you come in disguises:
in a friend asking for a chat, in a person asking for help,
in all calls for assistance.

May we take the time to hear you,
knowing that when we respond to one person,
we are responding to you –
who always responds to us.

Amen.

Blessing

Let's share in the grace together.
May the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us ever more. Amen