Sunday 22 November – Christ the King

Sermon by Sue Lyne

An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at Sermons (tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

Why do we have a parable about sheep and goats? Of course, when Jesus spoke these words, they would evoke a vivid image which his audience would easily understand. Sheep and goats often grazed together during the day but had to be separated by the shepherd at night. Needless to say, goats were less docile and more troublesome than sheep. They came to symbolise evil and the expression scapegoat has become a common expression for someone bearing blame for others. Goats symbolised an undisciplined and disobedient lifestyle

What does this parable teach us?

There is held out to each of us the alternative lifestyles which we can choose. We can either be sheep or goats, good or bad, in another parable we are challenged to ask whether we are wheat or weeds. This parable is also similar to the parable about Lazarus and the rich man. The rich man let Lazarus die on his doorstep and was doomed to crave for drops of cold water he had not thought of giving to the poor man.

So how do we behave, what do we do.

Of course, there is also another important point brought out in this parable, God will judge us not only for the wrong we have done but also for what we have failed to do. This is about sins of omission. God is gracious and merciful, and his love compels us to treat others with mercy and kindness. When Martin of Tours, a Roman soldier and a Christian, met an unclothed man freezing in the cold, he stopped and cut his coat in two and gave half to the stranger. That night he dreamt he saw a heavenly court with Jesus robed in a tattered cloak. One of the angels present asked, "Master, why do you wear that battered old cloak?" Jesus replied, "My servant Martin gave it to me."

When we do something for one of Christ's little ones, we do it for Christ. To be a sheep means to hear and respond. If we truly believe, we will realise God calls us through the presence of the poor and the needy. Our positive actions will partake in that call and lead us to the Kingdom. We must make an inventory of our lives and ask ourselves how far we have

sought to serve others. Perhaps we need to seek out new ways to serve God in our loving actions to others.

It is a constant theme of the teaching of Christ, that God judges us not by our status or achievements, but our continuing willingness to let the life of God be lived through us, our love for people. Faith demands every aspect of our lives: our minds, hearts, and daily activity. How have you and I exercised faith lately? How has the exercise of faith made us more empathetic and compassionate to others in need?

God gives us clear choice. Do we hear his call, as the sheep hear the shepherd? Or do we stand fast like the stubborn goats? It is true that we do need to struggle with how we can best care for the needy, as Jesus' parable says we should. How can we do it in a way that doesn't put them or us in bondage? But of course, the danger is that we can use this as an excuse to ignore need, rather we must search to see how we can work harder to meet that need in a constructive way.

Ultimately, it is no use spending our lives and energy pursuing good causes, defending endangered species, crusading for the environment, supporting the rights of homosexuals, urging sympathy for people in the third world, defending others against discrimination, if we have no time for the old person next door, or if we are rude to people, or impatient on the telephone, or don't make a cup of tea for the plumber or workman in our own homes.

In Jesus’ view of the kingdom, he is always near, ready to break through the barriers of every day and seize us, impel us, embrace us, challenge us. We don't need to wait for the kingdom or ask when it will come. The kingdom appears in ordinary daily events: a confused child, a sick friend, a discouraged spouse, a troublesome person on the phone, a demand that seems unfair, but where we can do much good with little effort. These are the places when we should be prepared to show and experience God's loving power.

The sheep would have known what they did, the kind actions which they had performed. Nevertheless, the sheep were surprised at their being told that Christ Himself was the personal object of all their deeds. They did not know that they found Him hungry and supplied Him with food. Neither did they know that they brought water to Him and quenched His thirst; that seeing Him naked and shivering, they put warm clothing upon

Him, paid Him visits when lying in prison for the truth, and sat by His bedside when laid down with sickness.

The duties which they performed they had done to help others, and Jesus sees in these actions care of his children as though it were care of himself. One of the wonderful things about these actions are that they are the sorts of things which we can all perform. You do not need to be special to be kind to the sick. Jesus did not say I was sick and you healed me; or in prison and you set me free; but “you visited me and came unto me."

This is ordinary but real, personal service of Christ, we can all do it, but it involves sacrifice of ease, time and property... There are those who do not recognise need in others. Our hardness of heart to others can become so much a part of our lives that we are unmoved to become unaware that we are sharp, abrupt or difficult to others. Or we can live cocooned in an environment of personal comfort and security so that we fail to understand the plight of others.

In a sermon on this passage John Wesley said,

'One great reason why the rich, in general, have so little sympathy for the poor, is, because they so seldom visit them. Hence, it is, that, according to the common observation, one part of the world does not know what the other suffers. Many of them do not know, because they do not care to know, they keep out of the way of knowing it; and then plead their voluntary ignorance an excuse for their hardness of heart. "Indeed, Sir," said one person of large substance, "I am a very compassionate man. But, to tell you the truth, I do not know anybody in the world that is in want." How did this come to pass? Why, he took good care to keep out of their way; and if he fell upon any of them unawares "he passed over on the other side."

If are prepared to have our eyes opened, then we can all too easily find situations of want and need. If we seek to have occasions when we can be of help to others, then they are all too apparent. Frequently we are asked to give of our time and talents in the service of others, from carol singing to cooking. God's kingdom is not a place, it is a relationship, we enter that relationship when we behave as Christ has commanded us, when we are obedient to him. And so, we come to the realisation that to help those in need and to serve others is to place ourselves firmly on the road to heaven, to enter into the joy of our Lord.

So, as we go out into the new week let us test ourselves, are we sheep or goats!

Do we allow the love of Christ to purify our hearts and to transform our lives?

Amen