



**26<sup>th</sup> November 2017**  
**Ezekiel 34.11-16, 20-24**  
**Matthew 25.31-end**

## **What sort of throne?**

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*Gracious God – may your Living Word come to us afresh this morning – so touch, we pray our minds and hearts with your grace and truth – through Christ our Lord and in the power of your Spirit. Amen*

Today is Christ the King Sunday, technically marking the end of the Church Year – in which we've been looking at Matthew's gospel. Next week it's Advent Sunday which starts the year of Mark.

Around the time of the build up to the Second World War the Pope designated this last Sunday of the year as Christ the King because there was a point of contrast to be made. With dictators coming to power in both Germany, and closer to home, Italy, the Pope wanted the Church to appreciate a different kind of King – a servant leader.

The God who came to us in Jesus as the one not to be served but to serve and give his life.

Well, how does that fit with this final part of Matthew's teaching before he takes his readers off to Jerusalem and the final days of Jesus culminating in the cross and empty tomb?

For a few chapters now Matthew has been grouping together stories about the coming Kingdom of God.

So begins our reading today: *When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.*

What follows is picture language and hyperbole. This is a story that is about a Day of Judgement with the sheep being commended and welcomed and the goats being judged and condemned.

I don't think any of the imagery here is to be taken literally even though the medieval church seemed to revel in using the idea of the fires of hell as their number one evangelistic tool. I'm not sure its ever right to scare people into a belief.

Matthew was probably writing his gospel just after the Fall of Jerusalem. The Romans raised the city to the ground and it must have felt like the end of the world.

These were tough days, and perhaps it was just natural to harbour a hope that when justice, humanly speaking, seemed elusive maybe God would intervene with judgement and teach the enemy a thing or two.

Whatever his reasons, not least that general view that Christ's return was just around the corner, Matthew has a certain harshness about him, with doors closing and fires raging, that makes these

parables of chapter 25, in some of our minds, strike a discordant note with the notion of a God of love and mercy we encounter in other biblical texts.

Now some of this disconnect may simply be down to the fact that something of these stories is lost in translation.

Apocalyptic literature, that is stories that reveal the end times, were two a penny in the ancient world. People loved them and knew how to interpret the picture language being used. Yet for us, so used to a style of prose that takes the world literally, this more poetic style is a challenge.

We also sit uneasy with the notion that hyperbole was an integral part of parable story telling. Ideas were blown out of all proportion – so, in the story of the forgiven yet unforgiving servant, the debt he owed and had rescinded was about the size of the deficit of a small country today. Obviously, no one person has ever owed quite that amount of money but it made the point. As Philip Hammond, the chancellor said on Radio Four this week: why let the facts get in the way of a good story!!

It's rather similar to the idea of a parent saying to fractious children on a car journey: if you don't quieten down soon I'll stop the car and strap you to the roof till we get to Torquay. You know you'd never do that, but you appreciate the brief five minutes of quiet that followed after you said it!

In other words – would the door to the careless bridesmaids ever be slammed in their face, or were the fires of hell and the threat of eternal torture ever anything other than a dramatic, rather than factual, way of storytelling?

Today's parable, on this particular Sunday of the year, begs the question: What sort of God do I believe in?

Do I believe in a punitive, punishment giving God?

Do I believe in a loving, mercy giving God? And are those two images of who sits upon heaven's throne compatible or mutually exclusive?

If we think this is just an enormous issue, well, there are more straightforward things in this parable too.

I mean it seems clear that at its core this story wants to teach us that it's the way we live that means as much, if not more than what we merely say we believe. Practice always wins over ritual.

Jesus was so often simply angry at people who came out of worship only to then misuse their power lording it over other people. For him that was a disconnect that was unacceptable. And so, in today's passage it's a generous, openhearted life that is being commended: providing for food the hungry, welcome for the stranger and clothes for the naked.

In the narrative the sheep are rather surprised to hear themselves being commended this way. They obviously weren't living like this to curry favour with God or fulfill their baptismal vows. They did it because this is the best of our humanity whether we are religious or not.

Another, hopefully straightforward lesson from this parable is the idea that none of us is always a goat,

or for that matter always a sheep.

I mean, if I were to ask all the goats in the congregation to sit on the choir side (don't infer anything into that choir!!) and all the sheep to remain on the pulpit side (ha-ha!) – I think that might cause total confusion with most of us opting to sit down in the aisle. We are never, exclusively, one thing or the other – at the same time, we are both.

And that is surely the point. Most of us are good goats! We have wanted to be openhearted and generous yet in reality we have sometimes ignored the hungry. We haven't always welcomed the stranger.

I'm told in Cashmere goats and sheep look almost identical – you can usually only tell the difference by whether their ears are up or down!

Surely the important lesson here is that we have a conscience. We want to live positively in community. We hear Jesus' words: feed the hungry, consider the prisoner, clothe the disadvantaged and we sense we have a part to play. Yet often so much else gets in the way and we lose perspective. The sheep and goats battle inside us. But it's a good tussle and it forms us into the people we are becoming.

But let's get back to the intriguing question on Christ the King Sunday as to what sort of throne there is in heaven.

On Tuesday the AFC Book Discussion Group is reflecting on Simon Loveday's: *The Bible for Grown Ups*. In it he makes this rather honest point.

He says if you believe in a punitive God you can find him in the bible, even in the gospels. In this image of God there will be talk of judgment and punishment.

But, Loveday also says: if you believe in a loving God where mercy prevails, you can find him too in the bible.

Now, some people, through their own personality traits, may be drawn more instinctively to one expression of God than the other and it's certainly true that depending on what image resonates most for us will influence the sort of follower of God we become.

So, if both pictures are before us how do we discern God today in scripture.

On Tuesday I was at The Quaker Meeting House in Old Amersham at The Beyond Difference Group that brings together people of different faiths and none.

We were led by Rabbi Charlie as she explained to us the basic tenets of Liberal Judaism and one rang a bell with me, because I think it's what we do here week by week as well. She called it 'Continuous Revelation'.

So, in both her tradition, and I think in ours, we read scripture, respectfully trying to understand its original context but then we ask the question: What is God, through his Spirit, teaching us today as we

read this story? And so, some fresh insight comes along and the bible really does become a living book as the written word and Living Word combine.

As I have, quite frankly struggled this week with the text set for today I do see that I am so naturally attracted to a loving God that maybe I too easily dismiss the God who calls me to judgement – not by the fires of hell, but the God who says compassion must be active – so what are you, Ian Green, doing about it in your own life?

I think I've also encountered the God this week who has reminded me that even though I work in the institutionalised Church and I am naturally drawn to a well ordered liturgy and well planned programme of activity – often this God of generosity and love is to be seen in people who never come across our threshold and would run a million miles from the idea of baptism, communion and church membership.

I've also been drawn to the words and actions of Jesus as he encountered moments when a judgement was called for in his own life.

He stood with a group of indignant village elders who were keen to pass sentence upon a woman caught up in adultery. As she, probably frozen with terror awaited her fate expecting it to be death by stoning, Jesus challenged those around him with these words: Let him who is without sin cast the first stone and no one bent down even to pick up a pebble.

And upon the cross, as the thief dies alongside him expressing but one thought, that Jesus, unlike him was innocent and didn't deserve death – so this thief doesn't assent to a creed, doesn't express a religious belief, isn't saying a prayer – just: Jesus, you don't deserve to die. And for that generosity of spirit our Saviour turns to him and says: Today, you will be with me in paradise. So that's a very different kind of judgement.

And lastly, and I think most importantly, as Jesus dies – he prays for those who have unjustly crucified him – not calling down upon them the punitive judgement of God, or the fires of hell – but praying to God: Father, forgive them – they know not what they do.

I'm not only deeply moved by this radical Jesus but deeply challenged. He asks me to look into my own heart and find that same generosity of spirit for others.

What sort of God do we think sits upon the throne of heaven?

For myself, I have a thought that from now on I'd like to do away with the feast of Christ the King and simply call it; Good Goat Sunday!

May something of God's love for justice and character of mercy fill all our lives in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2017*