The Bad Shepherd

As we prepare for the Advent season, which begins next Sunday, it seems like kind of a contradiction to be talking about the Judgment and end-times topics. But think about it this way; as we prepare to celebrate the First Advent, we prepare our hearts for the Second Advent by repentance and sober reflection on the coming of the Christ.

Would I be mistaken to say that some read this text and conclude this is the Last Judgement and we Christian believers are the sheep and inherit the kingdom. The goats are the non-Christians who are sent off to “eternal punishment.”

But you will probably be able to guess that I think this is a facile reading, meaning superficial and altogether too tidy. Besides that isn’t really what it says at all. So, if you’ll allow me, let’s see what I feel a somewhat more penetrating look produces and you an make up your own mind on the reading you feel is the best.

Context

I note a few things by way of context.

It is two days before Jesus dies on the cross. And in he speaks to his disciples and us in a series of parables in Matthew 24 and 25. He had just emerged from a visit to the Temple and he gathered his disciples on the Mount of Olives. Matthew 24 is the great apocalyptic chapter of the first gospel. It is dark and obscure, a difficult read. And now Jesus’ mind is taken up with a grand vista of the culmination of all things.

First, there is an accounting in history. And this is really one of the most fundamental aspects of the Christian perspective on the world. Where some religions see a perpetual cycle of life and death, as in reincarnation, or a limitless ocean of being into which we return, or in much of modern thought, silent oblivion, that is there is nothing after this mortal life. We as Christians see an end to history, with God and Christ triumphant and a restoration of the Garden before the fall.

The second thing to note on context is that this passage uses the shepherd motif so familiar to us from throughout the Bible. We note this week in the Psalms…we are his people and the sheep of his pasture… Psalm 95 and 100, and so beautifully in Isaiah 40:11:

He will feed his flock like a shepherd;  
    he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom,  
    and gently lead the mother sheep.

Now I’ve found a video clip that represents the scene just after the goats have been separated from the sheep, but I’m not sure they have quite grasped the gravity of the situation yet. Roll it.

[Play video clip of YouTube, Have a Super Hoppy Day aka baby goats in pajamas]

In the Text

The Son of Man will separate people on from another as shepherd separates sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at this right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at this right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by me Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world… (Matt 25:31-34)

A very powerful antecedent is found in Ezek 34, one which undergirds, I believe, much of Jesus’ self-understanding as God’s Son and his role as the Good Shepherd. Jesus said of himself, I am the good shepherd (John 10:11).

I would venture to say that all NT passages about the Good Shepherd and keeping the well sheep, are based on this remarkable passage in Ezekiel 34.

I have a volume titled the Commentary on the NT Use of the OT. It cites over 60 times the NT relies on a concept from Ezek 34. All of them to do with either the gathering and care of the sheep of Israel or the scattering the sheep of Israel.

The problem that Ezek 34 addresses is the behaviour of Israel’s spiritual leaders, the bad shepherds: Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide… (Ezek 34:21).

You haven’t taken care of the sheep, you haven’t gathered them in, you have abused and scattered them. You’ve allowed them to languish in need and desperation.

The passage in Matthew is really about failed moral and spiritual leadership and it arises out of Jesus’ perennial anger with his fellow religionists whom he felt had failed in their responsibilities to care for the sheep, to seek the lost ones; and his anger that they place impossible burdens of religion obligations on them.

[See the shellacking Jesus’ gives the Pharisees in Matthew 23, where in six searing paragraphs he says Woe to you scribes and Pharisees!; see also Matt 9:36; Luke 15:3ff; Luke 15:3ff; John 10:2-16]

And as Jesus’ life slips away, as the cross casts its shadow over his every step, he is full of indignation that his people have been lead astray, not cared for. And when he seeks and saves the lost, as God promised he would do himself in Ezekiel 34, all he hears about is ritual purity, the temple, the Law. ‘Why do you consort with these lost sheep rabbi?’ All the while his people flail and sink in desperation and sin.

This isn’t anti-Jewish. Jesus was a Jew. He just believed his fellow Jewish leaders were abrogating their role as true shepherds. Jesus wanted to restore Judaism to its true centre, love for God and fellow men and women. He wanted to seek and to save the lost.

Who are the sheep and who are the goats in this text?

The favoured sheep are those who (vv 35-39)

* Fed the hungry
* Gave water to the thirsty
* Welcomed the stranger
* Clothed the naked
* Took care of the sick
* Visited prisons

These are the blessed sheep, the good shepherds. And they are an example as how we ought to live.

When did we do these things to you Oh King?! And the king will answer the sheep, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ (Matt 25: 40)

Those do not act in this way are the Bad Shepherds… the goats. And that is it.

Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God:…You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. (Ezek 34:1ff)

Can you hear how that critique echoes point-by-point the life Jesus sets out for those who are properly led by God? It was said of Jesus that when he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matt 9:36)

From the Text

This passage isn’t just an apocalyptic curiosity. This passage isn’t about self-interest, “I get to go to heaven and you don’t.” This passage is about our responsibilities as moral and spiritual leaders; it is about the way we live and express our faith by our actions.

The story of the sheep and the goats is not the whole story. The story of all nations gathered before the Great Throne, is the story of the gospel of grace.

We hold that:

All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name (Acts 10:43)

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Even Bad Shepherds can find the grace of God and so be saved from the wrath to come.

But the most practical lessons to be learned are about moral and spiritual leadership.

Young person, if you are on the playground and you think nobody notices you, that nobody cares what you do or think. You would be wrong in thinking that. People notice how you act. And when you speak up for someone who is being bullied, that matters. When you don’t go along with crowd when you know it’s not right…you are being a leader.

When you are at high school or university, you may think your spirituality or moral stance doesn’t make a difference but it does. People see it. And God is using you everyday so you must be strong in the Way.

And when the scepticism is flying around the conversation at work, be encouraged, because, sometimes by your words, but just as often by your gentle non-judgmental silence, you bear witness to the quiet grace of God. People are aware and you are making a difference.

Who has not failed in this regard at times? Nevertheless, the transformative power of this judgment scenario is a call to act in life and a call to repentance. How appropriate as we prepare our hearts for Advent.

So who are the goats in this parable?

We are not really able to tell a sheep from a goat because we aren’t God. It might be that someone you think is a goat is a sheep. Or someone you think is a sheep, is a goat. Judgment is not given to us.

Nobody is a goat in their own eyes. It is a category to which we far to readily assign others. I’m always very careful when I’m tempted to think someone else is a sinner. Who am I? Am I not also a sinner? The grace of God be proclaimed always.

As it happens it isn’t that hard to know what we ought to do, and, in fact, to do it. So let us act like good shepherds in this awesome vista of the end.

When did we do these things to you Oh King?! And the king will answer the sheep, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ (Matt 25: 40)

Benediction:

Here is your God Oh Israel says the prophet Isaiah:

He will feed his flock like a shepherd;  
    he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom,  
    and gently lead the mother sheep.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit