

Christ the King Sunday

THE DIVINE "I" AND HIS SHEEP

Matthew 25:31-46

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Analysis by James Squire

31"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' 37Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 40And the king will answer them, '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.' 41Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

44Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' 45Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' 46And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

First, a few contextual references:

<http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Goat>:

"Unlike sheep, goats are equally suitable for herd and individual rearing. They are also much more lively than sheep and their inquisitive nature makes them curious pets... Goats are extremely curious and intelligent. They are known for escaping their pens and getting into mischief. Goats are also widely known for their ability to climb trees, although the tree generally has to be on somewhat of an angle. They may also jump on parked automobiles."

<http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Sheep>:

"Sheep tend to follow the lead of others; hence, one can refer to people as "sheep" when they follow a group of other people. This can occur because such people trust the group, or it can happen because people do not think for themselves. Such passive behaviour can be advantageous in that it offers greater protection from predators, and, if the flock finds a food source, can help ensure that all animals are fed. It can be disadvantageous if the group should make a mistake, such as following the wrong path to a food source.

"Sheep follow each other so reliably that special names apply to the different roles sheep play in a flock. One calls a sheep that roams furthest away from the others an outlier (the term also occurs in statistics). This sheep undertakes to go out

further away from the safety of the flock to graze, while taking a chance that a predator, such as a wolf, will attack it first because of its isolation. Another sheep, the bellwether, which never goes first but always follows an outlier, signals to the others that they may follow in safety. When it moves, the others will also move. The tendency to act as outliers or as bellwethers, or to stick in the middle of the flock, seems to stay with sheep throughout their whole life.”

DIAGNOSIS: Grade “F”

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Fixed on Curiosity*

Goats and Sheep, with their fixed behavior patterns, represent for Jesus excellent metaphors for the final judgment, when it is too late for any behavior changes. Those who earn the label “goat,” like their animal counterparts, are more interested in satisfying their own curiosity; they have little concern for the plight of those who need help. The reason why goats don’t see the least among them (v. 44) is because they are too focused on the object of their curiosity, whatever that might be, to be distracted by someone trying to herd them. Clearly, the Son of Man on his throne of glory has a decided preference for the “sheep,” who follow the shepherd and help each other out, over the individualistic “goats” who don’t resemble a flock in any way.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Focused on Self*

The “goats” prefer to trust in their own instincts than follow some leader. They would be happy to acknowledge a good leader, if they can find one themselves based on their own criteria. No wonder they fail to find the “I” of Jesus’ story – who would think to look among the poor and afflicted? Looking elsewhere,

the “goats” missed out on where the real action was, all because their trust was misplaced.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Frozen out by the Judge*

What they missed out on was the Son of Man’s own flock. Focused elsewhere, they found themselves forever on the outside looking in when the day of judgment came. In effect, they spurned the judge when they spurned the least, and the Son of Man in turn casts them into eternal damnation.

PROGNOSIS: F’s swapped for A’s

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Forged by the Least One*

In the end, the Son of Man is bathed in glory. For now, however, he is the storyteller with a captive audience, which is a kind of glory as well. But it is also a blinding glory, especially for those who look for a more apparent glory. Blinded to Jesus, the simple storyteller, and unfamiliar with the Son of Man in his story, listeners are left to hear what is spoken to the sheep and the goats. Amazing stuff! What we hear is that in between Jesus who tells the story, and the Son of Man who judges, sits One (the divine “I” of the story) who is called “the Least,” who is exposed and naked, who thirsts and hungers, and gets himself judged and imprisoned. He is the ultimate loser. But through this rejected One, who is now elevated to Son of Man, those who know him are “blessed by my Father, [to] inherit the kingdom prepared for [them] from the foundation of the world” (v. 34). Now, that is strange new kind of glory! It’s the kind of glory that judges all that we have been, and re-creates believers into sheep who belong to a strange new flock; we are led by a strange shepherd who subjects himself to all our earthly vulnerabilities and then redeems us through them. The spurned One herds us!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Freed by Faith*

Led by this peculiar shepherd who dies for us to follow him, we experience an unbelievable change in our own behavior and expectations: for folks looking for someone to trust, we receive a shepherd who trusts in us! He puts himself in our hands and trusts that we will take care of him and his Word and the Church that he commends to us. In Holy Communion, he literally empties himself out for us and trusts that we will eat and drink and share with others. This shepherd watches over his sheep and protects them, but he also empowers us to be lively followers. To us, he represents not what is glossy and sparkling and opulent in the world, but rather he represents what is needy in the world. And he entrusts that needy world to our care.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Fixed on Service*

Before we enter the kingdom that was prepared for us from the foundation of the world, we live in that kingdom's foretaste here and now, focusing not on Jesus the grand, magical storyteller, nor on the Son of Man, but on Jesus the Least, the Needy, the Dependent. It is quite clear that he is everywhere in this world. As re-created sheep, we participate in quite the flock, living not on the edge of curiosity like a goat, but on the edge of vulnerability like a sheep; we follow the Vulnerable One into prisons, ghettos, soup kitchens, and onto lonely roads. And, in doing so, we set ourselves against the glory seekers and power brokers of the world, but it is they who are lost and we who rejoice in our lot. For Christ's sheep don't celebrate the fall of the mighty; they are too focused on the Vulnerable One and all their fellow sheep in the herd. We are happy with the roles we play, some of us more adventurous than others, but all of us connected to each other through Jesus, the Least, and his Cross. Like sheep following their shepherd, we are set in Christ's ways!