

Sermon Last Sunday of the Church Year [Proper 29], Yr. A @ St Johns – 22/11/20
“The sheep and the goats” (Matthew 25:31-46)
- Pastor André Meyer

Pray: Father, open our hearts to your Word through your Son today, in Jesus' name, Amen.

I've a question for you... How would *you* tell the difference between a sheep and a goat? You can be fooled by looking at their horns – because both can grow them. Many might say, by looking at their coats – sheep have fluffy woollen coats while goats have hair. These days it's pretty easy for us to tell the difference merely by looking at their coats as they've been bred to look different for us today. Although looking at their coats is not fool-proof as some goats have woollen coats and some sheep have hair; so sheep and goats can look very similar to one another.

In ancient times, without developed breeding methods we have nowadays, sheep and goats looked quite similar to each other – particularly when they were grazing together, which was common practice. So, any other differences to work with? Most farmers across the world would know that to quickly tell sheep from goats you look at their tails... Tails *up* – it's a goat. Tails *down* – it's a sheep. Looking at their tails is the easiest way to quickly recognise sheep from goats, particularly if they're altogether.

Another big difference between them is the way they eat. Goats are considered 'browsers' as they feed on leaves and twigs higher up on vegetation, shrubs and plants. They can regularly be seen standing on their hind legs, getting their heads as high as they can to get what they want. Often they'll also eat *everything* and *anything*! On the other hand, sheep are considered 'grazers' as they prefer to feed on grasses, clover and other small plants closer to the soil surface.

Personality wise, goats often spend a lot of time investigating for they love to explore and they're forever 'nibbling' away at things. As they interact more than sheep with their environment they are considered to be more engaging and interesting animals, and as such are thought to have more personality and intelligence than sheep. If domesticated goats are left to fend for themselves, they can quickly turn rogue and into a wild state, like cats do. Goats often tend to follow the lead of a dominant head goat.

As grazers, sheep on the other hand, are much less interesting in their personality than goats. As a result, sheep are seen as more 'aloof' and less intelligent than goats, though it's not necessarily the case. Sheep mostly keep their heads down and their eyes on the grass and path in front of them, often following one another and heading into the wind. If domesticated sheep are left to fend for themselves, they're much less inclined to turn wild, and stay somewhat domesticated.

In the ancient world, where agriculture was part of everyday life, the personalities of sheep and goats became metaphors for spiritual life. As sheep were grazers, not only were their tails pointed downwards, their heads did as well. The posture of sheep towards life was seen as one of humility. In contrast, goat's tails pointed upwards and their heads were often raised. The posture of goats towards life was seen as a metaphor for pride. Their browsing and investigative style of eating and exploring, often doing their own thing, eating everything in sight, only served to punctuate this. Goats were seen as hard-headed compared to sheep – although any pastoralist would know that some sheep can be very hard headed as well! Goats seemed to be fine fending for themselves, while sheep truly benefitted from the guidance and care of a shepherd looking out for them. Nonetheless, even with these broad generalisations, somehow it was sheep who were more highly prized in the ancient world overall – likely perhaps for their wool and meat.

In those days, sheep and goats would often graze together which made them easier to keep track of, and two different flocks would have meant more shepherds were needed. Back then, the two animals looked much more similar with their coats and horns due to the limited breeds available. But there was another difference between sheep and goats, which is still apparent today, and, the reason that they regularly needed to be separated out from each other. Goats are more sensitive to the cold due to their thinner coats. As such, they ideally needed to be given some kind of shelter for the night – even a wall of rocks to huddle up against to keep themselves warm. Sheep are more resilient to the cold due to their wool and could weather most nights huddling together on their own.

They were separated in various ways, particularly by the unique calls of their shepherds to which they responded. Sometimes, shepherds needed to physically pick them out by hand and manually separate sheep and goats from each other. So, Jesus is referring to a well-known pastoral practice of separating the two animals into their different groups.

Today in Matthew 25, the last thing Jesus teaches in His long dialogue just prior to His journey to the cross, is of the separation of the sheep and the goats. It's like the punchline for all the other parables He's told, pointing us to the importance of what He will do next. The first shock He reveals is that it will be the Christ, "*the Son of Man*," not God the Father, as Jews believed, who will be King and Judge on the Last Day (v.31). Before Christ the King, all nations, all people will be gathered and a great separation will take place, as a shepherd separates his flock (v.32). He will put the sheep on His right, a place of honour and favour, and the goats on His left, a place of rejection and dishonour. Though left handed people are no more or less evil than right handed, Jesus' point is clear: there will be a separation – the 'blessed' on one hand, and the 'cursed' on the other.

The King will declare to those on His right, *“Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world”* (v.34). The advent of the King means of course that He has a kingdom, and His kingdom has been prepared since the foundation of the world. These words alone, give us great comfort. The One we already recognise as King, has prepared a kingdom and an inheritance for those who are His. Even before we were born, this King knew us and provided for His own. The King justifies His judgement with evidence He has somehow received, *“For I was hungry and you gave me... I was thirsty and you gave me... I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me”* (v.35-36). These are the ones the King calls ‘righteous.’

But those who called ‘righteous’ and ‘blessed’ do not even know they have served their King in this way. They are surprised to be designated ‘righteous’ before Him. It means that they did not do their good deeds to earn His favour. All they have done is to be His subjects, responding to need, as He has firstly cared for them. Their righteousness is not because of their works. They haven’t served Him to save themselves on the Last Day – for they are *not* even aware of the fruit they have produced. They have simply followed in the King’s ways – the way that leads to caring for ‘the least of these’ brothers and sisters of the King.

The sheep have kept their heads down on the task, honouring not themselves, but listening for the voice of their Shepherd so that they can follow and stay near to Him. The sheep have humbled their very lives before Him, and followed their Shepherd in the way of godly love. Whatever they did for the least of the brothers and sisters of the King, they unknowingly did, for the King *Himself*. Just as He served the least, so did they. Just as He gave a sacrifice of love and service for all people, so did they.

To the flock on His left the King will declare, *“Depart from me... For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me”* (v.41-43). Just as the blessed are surprised at their deeds of love towards the King through serving ‘the least of these,’ so are the cursed surprised that they have not shown love to their King. Their failure is to do what is right in His eyes. They did not help or serve those in need. Personal responsibility for the ‘least of these’ or their neighbour, hasn’t been on their hearts or minds. They had not realised their failure in life to serve the needy was important to the King. It means that they did not care to know or recognise what the King has done for them by His work of love on their behalf. The King doesn’t need to judge them, for they have already judged themselves.

The goats have been too wrapped up in their own cares and concerns of this life. They have ‘nibbled away,’ concerned with their own needs and direction in life, indifferent to the plight of the needy – the ‘least of these’ and the insignificant,

whom the King treasures as important. They have proudly wandered from the Shepherd, separating themselves from Him, ignoring His loving voice calling out for them to return. They will continue in the way they've chosen... and depart from Him forever.

So then, as we began, how will the sheep and the goats be recognised? Perhaps not easily to us, but before the King it is clear. They will be recognised by the fruit of faith. The faith that trusts and knows Jesus Christ as King, and believes in what He has done for them in grace and love. They trust in His sacrificial death for their sins upon the cross, and His resurrection from the dead. Faith receives the righteous things the King has firstly done for them. And faith responds, not to earn God's favour, but simply to see the heart of the King brought to the lives of the needy. The faithful live and serve in the King's name by outward acts of love out of gratefulness for what He has done. They receive from Him; they worship and listen to Him all their days, and so, their joy in His presence will continue *forever*.

As a bucket fills with water, so are we filled with God's Spirit and His grace, to overflow and bless those around us... to show mercy to "*the least of these*" – to *anyone* in need of what we may humbly supply. In our need, we were saved by the righteousness of Christ, who, by forgiving us our sin, has placed us at His right hand. He loved you so much that He planned your salvation and your reward before the foundation of the world. And, He continues to supply our needs with His Word and His precious body and blood. Why? So that we may continue to share the fruit of what He has done with others – in word and deed, serving to the glory and praise of our King. Amen.