

St Columba: 20 November 2011

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Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Matthew 25:31-46

Choosing and the End Times

Introduction to the readings:

Today is the last Sunday of the Church's year! We have completed a journey from the expectant waiting for the gift of life symbolised in the Christmas birth, through all the festivals of the church and stories about the discoveries of what it means to be 'people of God' from Abraham to Joshua. We have been challenged by Jesus' proclamation of the good-news of God and what that means for the way we live. Today's readings confront us with the 'end-times'... they invite us, in our imagination, to wonder where we will find ourselves at the end of time ... they invite us to be honest with ourselves about how we have kept our side of the covenant between God and the people; how we have embodied the demands for economic justice, kindness and generosity. They use the values of honour and shame as determinants as to who will be in God's household and who will be out, excluded from it.

Both readings use sheep and goats to represent honour and shame. 'Honour and shame' being two of the most powerful core values in the Middle Eastern culture of Jesus time, and in earlier Hebrew culture. Sheep and goats, two of the earliest domesticated animals are used throughout the Christian scriptures: sheep to symbolise honour, and goats, shame.

So the readings are full of the juxtaposition of honour and shame... listen for the number of times in both readings notions of honour are used ... Ezekiel opens with God saying “ I Myself will search for my sheep...” but ends with the caution “about fat sheep”!

This matter of honour, and inclusion in the household of God, continues in the Matthew reading. After Matthew’s stories of Jesus’ teaching on how to live the way of God so as to participate in the coming reign of God, his discourse now moves to painting a picture of the end time. Again, listen for the honour and shame motifs.

Sometimes writing a sermon is very difficult... so it was this week! All I could think of was that I never wanted to be a sheep! It was one of the ideas in the Bible that was enough to put me off the whole thing. Who in their right mind would want to be a passive, herd creature, (scared of *almost everything it seemed to me*) carrying great loads of wool for the benefit of someone else; my NZ mythology had painted sheep as a bit stupid ... all that follow the leader stuff. No, I did not want to be a sheep!

You can see that I had a hurdle to scramble over this week... both readings are stuffed full of sheep images!

My difficulty shows up the significance of context. My understanding of sheep comes from my NZ context and the way sheep are characterised in NZ story telling!

It points out how easy it is for us to misunderstand cross-cultural

imagery and symbolism; to miss the point when we shift from one culture to another.

Sheep in the Middle Eastern Culture of the times our Biblical stories were compiled, were considered honourable creatures, their loyalty to shepherd and their faithfulness, trust and patience highly valued - so much so they became symbols in story and text of 'honour' - the ultimate moral value in Middle Eastern culture -

such a contrast with the promiscuous, skittery goat that was a symbol for shame.

On this last Sunday of the Liturgical year, as we scan back over the year, honour and shame are offered to us a screens through which to sift our memories of events and actions - what we did, what we would have liked to do, how we felt about ourselves and about others. It is not easy for us Kiwis to get inside the depth of the feelings that motivated the behaviour controls that the honour and shame values were able to generate. Honouring or shaming your family and community was big stuff...Some Pacific cultures are more readily able to do get inside it, but most of us find it very difficult.

Matthew's take on the Jesus story, (written about 50 years after Jesus death) reflects clearly Jesus teaching that people mattered most, not laws; ethical attitudes and behaviours mattered more than ritual requirements. So in the Jesus community, (those who sought to follow Jesus way), honour was to be found in the way *people* were treated.

The link between Matthew's record of the Gospel and the Ezekiel

passage is easy to spot: sheep, feeding the hungry, rescue, and restoration to community of the lost, healing the sick and injured, peace-making and justice. Those who would be part of the reign of Christ (the kingdom of God) would, for the honour of the community of Christ, the followers to Jesus, attend to these matters! It was the ethical and honourable thing to do.

But, in the end, it is about the choices we make.

Ezekiel warns, in words spoken by God *“Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but must you tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet and drink what you have fouled with your feet?”* ... *“I will judge between fat sheep and lean sheep.”*

And in Matthew’s record Jesus too demands the hungry and thirsty be given food and drink, the naked clothed the stranger welcomed ... and all the rest that is so familiar.

So what choices have we made in the past year to honour the one we profess to follow? How have we honoured the family of Jesus, the one who has paints for us a picture of hope and possibility such that can keep us oriented to a future filled with good things?

How will this come to be?

What part will we play in bringing it about?

We are asked to answer these questions in every age, including today.

So we have to ask ourselves *“Do we want to continue the national economic trajectory, reported in the Dominion this week that cautions:*

the wealthiest 1% of our population own 3 times the wealth of the bottom 50% of our people!” If not what do we choose to do about it - in our personal lives, as a community as world?

In this coming week we have very important choices to make ... it is important we recall -

in the gospel of God, proclaimed for us through the teaching of Jesus, (who we know as the Christ, the anointed one of God), ***people matter most***. It is the health and wellbeing of all peoples that matter – justice and salvation for all.

So how we choose to share the resources of our nation and our world matters in as much as it enables us to participate in feeding the hungry, making peace and justice, caring for those who find themselves on the edge of our society, sharing the wealth of our nation.

Good choosing!

God Bless us, as we participate in choosing the ways that lead us into the reign of Christ.