



22 November 2020

The Sunday Next Before Advent (Christ the King; Feast of St Cecilia)

Sermon – St James's Piccadilly

The Revd Dr John Russell

*May I speak in the name of God – Creator,
Christ and Holy Spirit.*

My goodness there's a lot going on today! We've just heard the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. Yet another in-group out-group parable from the Gospel of Matthew for me to preach on, having already tackled the Wheat and the Weeds and the Ten Bridesmaids fairly recently. And today is the last Sunday Before Advent when most Anglican churches will be celebrating the Feast of Christ the King. But this is St James's, where an image of God as a male monarch is not necessarily going to be an easy sell. So I've also been quietly advised that it might be prudent for me to play down Christ the King and bump up St Cecilia whose feast day is also today because she's a girl and she's musical, so perhaps she feels a little bit more 'St Jamesey'! And on top of all that, at the end of today's service our deacon Mariama will commission our adventurous group of 93 Camino Companions and send us forth to begin our pilgrimage-in-a-pandemic that will last until St James's Day on 25 July next year. So over the 10 minutes, let me try to

weave you a thoughtful tapestry of sheep and goats and kings and virgins and pilgrims.

Now, this is the third time I've preached recently on the in-group out-group parables, and I don't want to repeat myself too much. In summary, as I've said before, dividing humankind into two sharply contrasted groups of people is a very familiar teaching device in Jewish Wisdom literature. So it's no surprise that we see the same technique occurring in the gospels, and we see it especially in the gospel of Matthew. This Parable of the Sheep and the Goats doesn't appear anywhere else.

Now if you were with us a couple of weeks ago on Remembrance Sunday, we were looking at the parable of the ten bridesmaids and I was saying that although the bridesmaids are separated into two groups – 5 of them wise, and 5 of them foolish – their behaviour throughout the parable is strikingly similar, and the critical difference between them is quite subtle and mysterious. The wise bridesmaids take an extra flask of oil with them, and are therefore better prepared to wait for the

beginning of the wedding feast. But it's not at all clear what the extra oil is supposed to represent. Is it faith? Is it prayer? Is it good deeds? In our online Sunday Forum on Zoom after the service, we had a great discussion and many of you offered your own suggestions. Perhaps it's grace? Perhaps it's the Holy Spirit? My personal favourite was from Carol in Australia who said that perhaps the oil was 'that which keeps you burning' which very skilfully opens up the possibility of the oil meaning something different to different people. What is it that *you* find most life-giving? What is it that fills *you* with joy? What is it that helps *you* be resilient in the face of life's challenges?

But here, in the parable of the sheep and the goats, the difference between the in-group and the out-group is made very explicit. Seated on the throne of glory, surrounded by angels, the Son of Man separates humankind into two groups. The sheep will be invited into God's glory whereas the goats will be condemned to eternal punishment. And, with wonderfully helpful transparency, Christ the King explains *why*, by saying to the blessed sheep, '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'. But his audience is confused by this and they ask 'Sorry, Lord, when did we do that?' and

Christ answers, '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.'

Now, especially in the context of today being the Feast of Christ the King, this is a fantastically concise encapsulation of one of the central paradoxes of Christianity. One way of looking at the gospels is that they all revolve around the crucifixion of Jesus as the deepest and truest revelation of the nature of God, and that the gospels are always both heading towards and reverberating outwards from the Cross, and the gospel writers offer us a whole series of symbols and metaphors to help us try to assimilate the scandal of the crucified god as the deepest disclosure of God's being. From the annunciation by the angel Gabriel to Mary, an unremarkable Jewish woman living in a first-century flea-pit peasant town twelve miles southwest of the Sea of Galilee. To the incarnation of the Almighty and Everlasting Source of All Being in the form of a fragile baby born in a stable humming with the smell of animal dung. To the Temptation in the desert when Jesus rejects all Satan's invitations to succeed in God's mission through a forceful use of power. To the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem riding upon a humble donkey. To the Servant Leader who kneels and washes the feet of his disciples. To the institution of the Eucharist, where Jesus identifies the

bread and wine as his body and blood, and then breaks the bread and feeds his disciples with his broken body. A rich catalogue of different ways to represent kenosis, the self-emptying of Jesus, that reaches its apotheosis on the Cross.

And most of the time these images of leadership through servanthood, of the truest power being poured out in the most vulnerable love, are being contested and rejected – not just by the Pharisees and Sadducees and the Roman authorities – but by the closest followers of Jesus.

Again and again, we see the disciples struggling to comprehend what Jesus is doing and saying. Peter, for example, rebuking Jesus when he begins to talk about his imminent suffering and death. The disciples' persistent tendency to start bickering with one another about which one of them is the most important, including at the Last Supper straight after Jesus has just fed them with his broken body. And I think one of the most persuasive ways of understanding the betrayal by Judas, is that it's an attempt to force Jesus's hand into an aggressive show of power, which – as we know - he steadfastly refused to do.

Throughout the gospel, these ideas of conventional kingship and the long-anticipated Messiah who would lead the

Jewish people to victory, keep clashing and jarring with Jesus's teaching and actions.

And here in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats – in the 25th chapter of Matthew's gospel, the *very last parable* before Matthew begins his Passion narrative – these ideas are sandwiched together as Christ the King, enthroned in glory, surrounded by angels, reveals that he is the beggar, the stranger, the prisoner. It's not presented as a metaphor or an analogy. It is Christ saying that we literally meet God in other people, and especially in the poor, the homeless, and the persecuted.

Note that it's not the *good Samaritan* who is Christ – instead Christ is the person who's been attacked, and beaten, and stripped and left half-dead in a ditch at the side of the road. And the critical difference between the sheep and the goats, between us being an object of God's eternal joy and delight or of God's sadness and despair, lies in our response to that traumatised person, humbled and ennobled in the heart of God, humbled and ennobled like the Beggar King with arms outstretched, raised up to heaven on a bare hill on a bare tree now made so strangely fruitful.

In their book *Virtuous Magic*, the feminist theologian Sara Maitland and poet Wendy Mulford explore over 40 of the female saints as 'women who have not dodged the interior obstacles to surrendering the

self..., women who have demonstrated a readiness to go into the abyss of self and confront the inner darkness or emptiness there.' The legends of the saints tell that Cecilia was a young woman aged 16 years' old in third century Rome. Though she had dedicated herself to God as a holy virgin, she was given by her parents in marriage to a pagan named Valerian. At her wedding feast, Cecilia closed her ears to the crude musicians singing bawdy songs about the impending marriage bed, and instead sang in her heart hymns to Christ, her heavenly bridegroom. And later, in their bedroom, when her eager new husband advanced upon her, Cecilia told him that she was guarded by an angel, and if he would be purified then he could see the angel too. So Valerian duly went off to be baptised, and returned to find Cecilia praying with an angel at her side, and her holy virginity was preserved. For sometime after Cecilia and her husband went about Rome helping the poor and suffering, and arranging Christian burials for fellow believers. But as the Roman persecution of the Christians intensified, Cecilia was arrested. Offered the chance to renounce Christ and make a sacrifice to the Roman God Jupiter, Cecilia instead chose death. She was tortured horribly, scalded in a bath of boiling water, suffocated, partially beheaded and eventually died 3 days later, joining the ranks of the virgin martyrs.

Maitland and Mulford are intrigued and disturbed by such lurid medieval narratives of defiant sexual purity, the picaresque legends of feisty virgins who slay dragons and outwit men, and cleave fast to their faith in Christ in the face of the most grotesque tortures and mutilations. And when these feminist authors want a metaphor to describe the challenging process of writing their book together, they say it's been like a pilgrimage: 'Because a pilgrimage is at once profoundly concerned with the search for the divine Other, and the search for the transforming of the Self. It is an opening up, a prising apart of closure, of familiarities and securities and easily acquired knowledge, in pursuit at one and the same time of the unknown and the known.'

At the end of the service today, we will send our own 93 Camino Companions forth on a courageous 8-month pilgrimage-in-a-pandemic to deepen their relationship with God and with each other, to explore and discern new rhythms of life for themselves, to nourish themselves with the Eucharist, with silence, with conversation, with action. It is the same pilgrimage upon which all people of faith are invited to embark: to dare to say yes to what calls us beyond ourselves, and to discover the risky joy of a life lived fully for other people in the service and praise of God. And so, on

her feast day, let us invoke the protection
of St Cecilia upon our pilgrims:

*Blessed Cecilia, appear in visions, appear and
inspire,
come down and startle our embarking pilgrims
with immortal fire.
Sing for your loves of heaven and of earth
And coax our roughened hearts to a new birth.
Kindle the long cold winter of our intellectual
will
So pilgrims trust in guardian angels still.
Restore our fallen day 'til from the earth our
sacred song shall rise
To meet your own and praise God in the skies.**

Amen

(*based on songs for St Cecilia's Day by John
Dryden, WH Auden and Ursula Vaughan Williams)