

For the last couple of weeks we have been looking at Jesus instructions to his disciples on how they should conduct themselves in the period between Jesus return to heaven and his second coming, when he will judge all people everywhere.

And through the parables of the 10 bridesmaids or virgins and the parable of the talents, we have seen that Jesus instructed his disciples to live a life of obedience to him and his commands. He warned them to make sure that there was consistency between what they claimed to believe and how they behaved – they had to walk the walk not just talk the talk.

Last week we were reminded that we should put our talents, our gifts, experiences, all our resources, time and money, to good use, to serve the kingdom of God.

And Jesus teaching on the responsibility of the disciples while we wait for Jesus return continues this morning as we look at the next parable in Matthew 25 – the sheep and the goats.

And in this parable the picture that Jesus used is that of final judgement when all nations will be gathered before him – emphasising not only the certainty of the return of the Son of Man, but also the judgement of the world.

As I have said, the concept of a final reckoning is not popular toady, even among some Christians, but in each of these 3 parables that we have looked at in Matthew 25, the return of the Christ is accompanied by judgement and a separation of the people, some being blessed, others being punished.

So in this parable, at that time of judgement Jesus will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats – Jesus will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

And it is no surprise that the Sheep, a common scriptural picture for the people of God receive Christ's blessing – **Come you who are blessed by my Father. Take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.**

But what is surprising is the reason that Jesus gives for their blessing - **Matt 25:35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 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.'**

Not surprisingly the righteous – the sheep, God's people reply – when – we never saw you in any of those situations –

And so Jesus clarifies things for them - **Matt 25:40 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'**

And Jesus continued by addressing the goats – the opposite is true for them, they were cursed because they didn't give assistance and comfort to Jesus in his time of need – they, like the righteous protest – when were you hungry – and Jesus affirmed, **Matt 25:45 I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'**

And with that they are sent away to eternal punishment – we may not like it, it may not be popular, but take it up with Jesus, and the righteous go to eternal life.

As we look at what this parable means for us today and how we respond to it, I have to warn you that while this is one of the most well known parables in the bible, I believe that there is a possibility that this is also one of the most misunderstood parables in the scripture. So this morning what I want to do is give us two different meanings from this parable, and I'll let you decide which you think is most likely to be what Jesus intended.

The first, the traditional understanding, the one that most of you will have heard preached is a pretty tough message for us to hear and even tougher for us to put into practice – it is the call to social action.

The second understanding, which is gaining in popularity among bible experts, is even harder for us to put into practice. But we will get to that in a minute. But the key to both of these understandings is the interpretation of verse 40, and the identification of the least of these my brothers.

So, firstly, the traditional understanding.

The material that we use to plan our themes for the morning services is call light years, produced by Scripture Union – and it says that the aim of this morning's service is to reconsider our understanding of serving God in the light of Jesus identification of himself with the least important people.

Whoever wrote this morning's material has understood the least of these my brothers, to refer to all the suffering and poor in the world.

So, in the parable people are judged according to how they respond to the plight of the poor of the world. If they show compassion to them then they receive blessing – if they don't show compassion, then they are cursed. Why, because when we help the poor we help Jesus, because Jesus is in the poor.

With this understanding, the parable is a call for social action, for Christians to get out there and help alleviate poverty and suffering - and over the years this parable has been the clarion call of the social gospel.

And this understanding fits with what we read elsewhere in scripture. In the e-mail that I sent round this week, the scripture verse I attached to it was **1 John 3:18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.**

A thought echoed in James - **James 2:14-17** **What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.**

There is no doubt that testimony of scriptures both old and new is that God has a heart for the poor and needy in the world. And there is an expectation that his people will share his heart and, where it is within their power, will offer help to those in need.

To see people in need and not respond, reveals that people do not share that heart of God, which puts their salvation in doubt.

And so a question we would be wise to ask ourselves this morning is, what are we doing to help poor in our community, in our world?

What are we doing with our money – how much do we use to help those in need? As Church we give away 20% of our money to support national and international charities that seek to alleviate poverty and hardship – what about the money that we as individuals keep back for our own use? Could we use it less selfishly?

What about our time – often more precious to us and our families than money? Could we give some of it to help those in need? Could we get involved in a local charity like scratch, are there things you could do within the church? What are we willing to give of ourselves?

So that is the first, traditional, social action understanding of this parable. But there is another interpretation that is becoming more accepted,

This second understanding stems from unease with the social action understanding. In the social action understanding where the least of these my brothers are thought to be the poor of the world, the judgement of the nations in the parable rests on broad humanitarian principles. If you love the poor, then you will be saved. This sounds like salvation by works, which we know is inconsistent with rest of NT, so perhaps we are misunderstanding the parable. Perhaps we need to take another look.

As I said earlier, the key is identifying the least of these my brothers. A growing number of bible experts now seem to agree that it isn't the poor of the world, but rather Jesus disciples. Elsewhere in Matthew, Jesus used the phrase little ones to refer to the disciples and Jesus consistently used the phrase my brothers to refer to those disciples that did the will of God.

If the least of these my brothers are Christ's disciples, rather than the poor of the world, then the nations are judged on the basis of how they have responded to Jesus, as presented to them by his disciples.

So one bible expert sums it up like this

'Jesus visits the world through his disciple messengers, who find themselves in hardship and need as they move from place to place. The blessed are those who have opened themselves to Jesus by welcoming his messengers and offering hospitality'.¹

And bible expert says, **men's "yes" or "no" to the preaching of these messengers, as displayed in their treatment of them, is the criterion for vindication or judgement**

And a confirmation of the correctness of this understanding of the parable is found in 10: 40 where Jesus makes a similar point.

Matt 10:40-42 He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."

This understanding of final judgement is consistent with the rest of scripture, people are judged on how they respond to Christ preached to them by his disciples, and their response is born out in their action towards the disciples.

Now, this interpretation of the passage means that it can no longer be used as a call for Christians to serve human need, as it is used in the social gospel. That doesn't mean that call is not found in scripture – as we have seen it is consistent with other passages such as 1 John and James.

But this parable seems to be more concerned with *'how the world receives and responds to Jesus, not how Christians respond to the world'*.²

So, if this interpretation is correct, and it isn't a call to serve the poor, what is the point that Jesus is making?

I think it is this, and I did warn you that it is harder to hear than the social gospel – it is a challenge to the disciples to continue to serve Christ by taking his message to world, even when that means that they find themselves in hardship, hungry, thirsty, a stranger, without clothes, sick, or in prison. It is a challenge not to shy away from the hardship that they will face as they continue to serve Christ and wait for his return.

In this interpretation, rather than being the ones that are challenged to feed the poor, they **are the ones** who for the sake of the gospel are poor.

¹ Gardner, 1991, 359. Schweizer, while himself rejecting this interpretation, argues that *if* "the least of these my brothers" is taken to refer to the disciples, then men's "yes" or "no" to the preaching of these messengers, as displayed in their treatment of them, would be the criterion for vindication or judgement (Schweizer, 1976, 478-479).

² Gardner, 1991, 363.

And history tells us that this was indeed the experience of those early disciples. They did embrace a life of hardship and persecution as they shared the gospel. They did find themselves hungry and thirsty, they were the stranger, the odd one out, we know that they endured prison and beatings – yet they kept the faith, they kept going as they served God and spread the good news.

And today, as we look at Christ's people throughout the world, are there not countless believers who continue to experience this today? Willing to give everything to follow Christ and preach the good news.

As I said, this is an altogether more radical understanding of the parable, one that is hard for us to hear, as we have so much to lose if we are to be like this picture of the disciples.

But I wonder if our material prosperity and security has twisted our understanding of Christ's message. Has our understanding of Christ the radical become sanitised so that this view of the cost of following Jesus has become almost unspeakable?

We can cope with the challenge to feed the poor, bung them a few quid once in a while to ease our conscious, but are we willing to become poor in order to spread the gospel? Are we willing to let go of our security, our prosperity for the sake of Christ?

Now, Christ may not ask that of us – and that is not the point of the parable – the point of the parable is this - if he did, would we be able to say yes?

What is more important to us – making sure that other people hear the good news of Jesus and have the chance to share eternity with him, even if that causes us inconvenience, even hardship or our own material prosperity and security?

Finish by reading an article from the BT.