

New Year's Day

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Introduction

When might it be helpful to make binary distinctions, e.g. between 'right' and 'wrong'? When might this not be helpful? What was Jesus' meaning. In telling the story of the separation of the people of all the nations into 'sheep' and 'goats'? We consider the question of assessing core priorities and taking action based on these priorities. How we live in the 'now' will impact the 'not yet.' So, take action in favour of any who are in need now and your life will make a lasting difference.

Text

Matthew 25: 31 – 46

The Judgement of the Nations

'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. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then 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; for 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, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then 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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And 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." Then 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; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I 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." Then 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?" Then 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." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

The Gospel text for New Year's day is a troubling one: what place does 'a holy sorting hat' have in a Gospel of peace, love and reconciliation? In recounting Jesus' story of the separation of the sheep from the goats, this text compels us to consider 'good' versus 'bad' and to take a stance. In a world of inclusion, and 'all views count' this might be difficult to compute.

But there's hidden meaning, as ever, in this text. Matthew's gospel offers us images of Kingdom, and King, contrasting the earthly King ruling with Authority, Power and Might with our heavenly king who elevates the poor and needy and asks us to accompany him on this journey. The blessed are those who have seen this king, recognised him and are following him, and who notice the kingdom present now.

Matthew exhorts us to follow this king, for if we don't, the consequences will be dire, apocalyptic even. Jesus tells of "coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (Matthew 24:30); and foreshadows the end of his teaching ministry, and the coming judgement (Matthew 24:30-31; Matthew 26:64) in graphic terms. So we shouldn't be surprised by the powerful image of Jesus our friend on a throne not lording over a single nation, but over all nations, with celestial bodyguards. This is serious stuff, with consequences. Keep watch, and listen to what's being asked of you.

If we find ourselves following false gods, being drawn too fully towards consumption, greed, selfishness then we must return to the message of the king of the gospel, which is to look out for the needs of others. This is what it means to be an evangel – a bearer and teller of the good news. Rather than wringing our hands about whether we are on the side of the sheep or the goats, we are instead compelled to ask: how can I be part of the kingdom project now? Where can I serve the needy, poor, hungry, sick, rejected?

Stanley Hauerwas wrote, "The difference between followers of Jesus and those who do not know Jesus is that those who have seen Jesus no longer have any excuse to avoid 'the least of these.'"

A more direct reading of this passage for New Year's Day is about setting priorities. What are your priorities? For these will influence your 'now' and your 'to come.' How we live now, in the present, in the 'kingdom' that is 'present now' will impact the rest of our lives – on earth and beyond.

Service to others, and love of neighbour as self, is the highest priority in Jesus' teaching. We are called therefore to care for those who need food, drink, warmth, compassion, acceptance. The ones who are blessed by God, are those who turn their attention to the needs of others.

Our text today calls us to act for others with humility, and with an un-self-conscious ease. The one who parades their good works is presumably more interested in being seen to be being good, than in simply getting on with it.

Mother Teresa said "I see Jesus in every human being. I say to myself: this is hungry Jesus, I must feed him. This is sick Jesus. This one has leprosy or gangrene; I must wash him and tend to him."

So, set your priorities now. Set your new year resolutions today. Calibrate your compass this morning – because even the slightest shift in the direction of travel will change dramatically the final destination. This move may not feel radical, but will have radical – root and branch – consequences. In Anne Tyler's novel 'Noah's Compass', the gentle but hapless Liam finds his life radically re-calibrated by a house move. A seemingly inconsequential move, which proved dramatic and brought despair and pain in the short term, resulted in him re-finding the core of his inner peace in a rhythm not unlike that he had left behind. Sometimes we need a simple radical action to jolt us out of the humdrum, to re-calibrate our spirit.

This text from Matthew is startling and stark: there will be dire consequences if we don't act for justice and peace in the 'now.'

Response

What are your priorities for the coming year? Talk about these with those around you, and reflect on them in the light of today's gospel reading.

Reflecting on the story of the sheep and the goats, think of times in your life, and in the life of your faith community, when it has been helpful to designate binary differences. Think of the times when designating 'right' and 'wrong' has not been helpful. Find a group in your church or faith community willing to talk about the grey area between 'right' and 'wrong.'

Commit to spending time together in your faith or church community in 2018 sharing honestly, openly and graciously in areas where you know you have what seem to be binary differences. Listen to each other in order to understand – not necessarily to agree.

Prayer

Dear lord and king
of each day and each
New Year, gather us in
and send us out to
bring justice to all
and peace on earth.
Amen.