

9AM, SNC & ONLINE – 20 DECEMBER 2020

WARNED [MATTHEW 25:31-46]

For those who missed the email update this week, the Lord took Ruby home on Thursday morning. One of her daughters and son in law were present with her at the time, yet more importantly the Lord was with her and she is now with him forever. Whilst many of us will rightly grieve Ruby's absence, we also share a sense of relief and joy that she is now in the place where every tear will be wiped away. Thank you to those who have lovingly upheld Ruby and her family in prayer over the last couple of weeks, I feel Ruby was able to convey to me the Thursday before last that she very much felt the effect of those prayers. A service of thanksgiving for Ruby's life will be held here at 2pm on Tuesday for those able to join, and it will be livestreamed for those who aren't. For those able to join, they've asked people to wear something colourful as a sign of celebration of Ruby's life.

Before we go any further however, let me read these words from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 in light of Ruby's death, and also in light of the loss of Rosemary, Maxine and also of other dearly loved family members this year.

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴ For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Amen. Church, be encouraged. Let me pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for Ruby and for the legacy of love and generosity she leaves behind in our lives and in the lives of many. We thank you for giving her her daily bread over the last couple of weeks and also for sustaining her family. As you were honoured in her life, be honoured in her death, and even at this sad time be glorified. We pray that you would give her children and their partners strength and wisdom over the coming days and ongoingly as they grieve. We pray that they would come to find comfort in the eternal hope that was an anchor for Ruby's soul. And now as we come before your Word, we pray that you feed us, guide us, teach us, and lead us to repentance and faith. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

The Judge (31-33)

Perhaps the news regarding Ruby sharpens our attention on the eternal realities Jesus speaks of in this morning's passage. Jesus certainly doesn't mince his words here. Whereas previously he has spoken about the coming kingdom of heaven in parables, here he simply tells us like it is. He tells us what it will actually be like when he returns. The lamb who came to take away the sins of the world, lying in a manger, will one day return to be the lion and judge of all.

And so we don't miss the towering significance of Jesus' words in verses 31-33, let me read something of their Old Testament backdrop in Daniel 7:13-14 –

"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

The scene of Daniel 7 is of God's mighty throne room and of countless thousands attending upon God and his enemies being judged and destroyed. In referencing himself as the son of man and using the imagery of Daniel 7, Jesus here affirms that he is the king of this epic and apocalyptic vision.

Though there was no room at the inn, though he was mocked, beaten and crucified, we need not pity Jesus. For through it all he never ceased to be the king of all the universe. He never ceased to rule and reign. Indeed what is astounding given the portrait we have of Jesus here, is how such a one of untrammelled and unrivalled rule and authority would condescend in love to be made flesh, to be in utero, to be pushed out a birth canal, and to brutally be nailed to a cross, dying of tortuous asphyxiation. Yet this is precisely what he did, the all-powerful lion is also the gracious lamb.

And as verse 32 reminds us, **All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.** Though not universally acknowledged as such, he is the rightful ruler over all the nations, every single living person on this planet is accountable to him and will one day be gathered before him. It's a guarantee. And at this point, Jesus the judge of all will separate humanity into two groups. As an ancient near eastern shepherd would separate the sheep and goats at nightfall, so too will Jesus separate those who are his, from those who aren't. He will separate those blessed by God from those under the curse of their sin. Let's consider both in turn, firstly the blessed in verses 34-40.

The Blessed (34-40)

One of the eye-openers for me since moving to 9am is the fragility of the human body, it really is temporary. There is never a Sunday when there aren't people here facing or recovering from serious diagnoses. As such I've come to appreciate something of the wait for the results of a PET scan, CT scan, MRI or pathology. In those times, we pray for clear results because we want to know that the surgery has been successful, that the treatment has been effective and that healing has taken place.

Yet as much as we pray and long for clear scans, or clear results, we know that it's not the scan that saves us, don't we? Rather the scan provides only the necessary evidence that the healing has taken place. Let me say that again, the scans don't heal us, but only provide the necessary evidence that the healing has taken place.

And as it is with scans and our health, so it is with good works and our salvation. It's possible to misread this passage and see the good works as the cause of our salvation, when actually they are only the necessary evidence that our healing or salvation has taken place. Just as there can be no clean bill of health without a clear scan, so can there be no salvation without evidence of God-honouring good works in our lives. But they are not the cause of our salvation. Nowhere is this perhaps spelled out more clearly in scripture than in Ephesians 2:8-10, **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.**

Or even as John the Baptist says to the Pharisees, Saducees and Teachers of the Law in Matthew 3:8, **Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.** The root of our salvation is Christ, but when we turn to him in repentance, there will be fruit in keeping with repentance. No fruit, means no healthy root. As John goes on to say in 3:10, **The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.** Good works are the necessary fruit, but not the root of our salvation.

In fact the passage itself reveals that we are not dealing with a works based salvation, verse 34 speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven not as a reward or wage for work, but as an inheritance, a gift.

Indeed if we were speaking about a works-based salvation, it's hardly likely that those who inherit eternal life would have been surprised by it if working for it. Lastly, the simile of the sheep and the goats indicates that we are not talking about behaviours, but of being. A goat can try act like a sheep all it wants, but in the end it cannot be a sheep and will not produce merino wool for example. Our eternal inheritance is given to us not on the *basis* of what we do, but of who we are in Christ. Yet who we are in Christ will nonetheless be evidenced in our lives.

So what are the evidences that Jesus spells out here? In verse 40 the King will say, **Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'**

We've already spoken about Jesus' loving condescension in his incarnation and crucifixion, but we again see it here in his loving identification with us his people. You see, by faith we are joined to Christ through Holy Spirit, such that we are called the body of Christ. So much so, that what is done to a believer is in-effect what is done to Christ. Consider how Jesus charges Saul in Acts 9:4 after he has been persecuting the church, "**Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?**" Or as Ananias and Sapphira lie to the church in Acts 5:4, Peter says to Ananias, **You have not lied just to human beings but to God.**

Such is God's love for us, and such is our redemption in Christ, that by faith we become one with God. Christ dwells in each of us by his Spirit and so when we show love even to the most seemingly inconsequential of God's people, we actually love Christ himself. And as those who have been loved by Christ and who love him in return, how could we not love his people as we encounter Him in them? Loving Jesus' people is a necessary evidence of our salvation.

Yet I think that come eternity, this necessary evidence will also include those whom we had no idea were God's people. Again, I think that in part explains the surprise here. There will be those whom we love and serve simply because they are made in the image of God, but who turn out to be God's people. Perdita Herbert from Warrawee Anglican told me how this sweet nurse at Mount Wilga came to her in the middle of the night whilst in the midst of a coughing fit. This nurse went above and beyond the call of duty and in a way no other staff had. The nurse was Ruby and she had no idea who Perdita was. Yet upon finding out, you can imagine how Ruby responded, beyond Perdita's discharge, Ruby regularly knocked on Perdita's front door to check in on her whilst in isolation and drop off food. What Ruby did for Perdita initially, she unknowingly did for Christ.

Perhaps in other instances we will show love to those not yet belonging to Christ, but who come to share our faith as a direct or indirect result of our loving service, and perhaps we will never find out until eternity, yet in that moment, we will know that what we did for them we did for Christ.

What an incentive to lovingly serve those around us! To know that we can bless Christ himself by blessing his people! Imagine hearing words like this when we stand face to face with Jesus, "When I was homebound with chronic illness, you cooked a meal for me." "When I was a single parent and juggling and struggling with all the demands upon me, you picked up the kids from school." "When I was mourning my parents, you provided a shoulder for me to cry on." "When I was experiencing severe behavioural difficulties with my kids, you were the one who prayed daily." "When I was unconscious and unresponsive in the hospital bed, you were the one who lovingly visited me." "When I was difficult and unloveable, reeling from deep personal pain, you kept pursuing me and befriending me. **Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.**" Imagine hearing that from Jesus' lips. I know there are some here who will hear those very words.

The Cursed (41-46)

Yet the sobering nature of this passage also indicates that there will be some here who will hear Jesus' alternate words in verse 41, **Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.** And again in verse 45, **Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'**

There will be some who are very unpleasantly surprised. Like the foolish bridesmaids without oil, or the servant who buried his talent, like those in Matthew 7 who cry out "Lord, Lord" but whom Christ never knew. Will this be you?

Do you claim Jesus as Lord, but your life bears no evidence of the same? Do you claim to follow Jesus but there be no trail of costly love for Christ and his people in your life? If so, you're like the patient who in delusion claims health, whilst the scans reveal the cancer has metastasized.

Some like to speak of their faith in terms of omission – I haven't killed, I haven't committed adultery, I haven't stolen. But Jesus speaks of our sinfulness here in terms of omission. Those who don't belong to him will evidence it in what they have failed to do – they have failed to love the hungry, thirsty, the foreigner, the naked, the weak and the sick.

Do you really live with Jesus as Lord, or do you merely pay him lip service as Lord? One clear way this will be evidenced in our service of others. As a scan evidences of the state of our health and as the external characteristics of sheep and goats give them away, our lives will vindicate the rightness of God's judgement. Our good works will not be the grounds for our salvation, but the evidence of it.

It's been one of the humbling joys journeying with Ruby these last couple of weeks. As I just shared the story about Perdita, many more have flooded in of meals cooked, warm welcome given, prayers prayed, encouragements spoken. Though ultimately God is the one who sees all, knows all and judges all, I thought to myself, Ruby is a woman who bears the unmistakable hallmarks of a sheep. You just couldn't hide it, through the difficulties and pains of her life, she walked like a sheep, talked like a sheep, looked like a sheep and smelled like a sheep. Her life wasn't the grounds of God's salvation, but the necessary evidence that Jesus had saved her.

For Us

So what does this mean for us? Well as much as this passage is an incentive to Christ-honouring service, it's also a warning to all of us as much of Matthew 24-25 have been. Jesus loves us so much he warns us against being amongst the goats.

Are you one that calls Christ lord, but lives your life independent of his rule? Are you one that claims faith, but fails to show sacrificial love to God's people around you?

Now I want to say that there is an extent to which this is true of all of us. There will be sheep here who have been living like goats, and Jesus bids you to repent, to turn to him and to not drift from your faith in disobedience. In fact, the true mark of a sheep who knows Jesus voice is not perfection, but one who turns in repentance whenever they hear their master's voice. If that is you, turn back to Christ this morning, repent of your lovelessness, repent of your disobedience, turn back to the cross and know that in Christ your sins have been forgiven and that the Holy Spirit has been given to you to enable you and empower you to start living God's way. Then perhaps pray that God might encourage you by giving you a glimpse at how he has been changing your life to live selflessly and lovingly for Christ and others.

To those who are convicted that you don't belong to Christ, that either you've never responded to him in repentance and faith and you realise you deserve God's judgement, or perhaps you realise that you thought you'd done this but in reality you hadn't. The call is the same, turn to Jesus. Jesus came and died on the cross for you, not because you deserved it, but precisely because you didn't. As the apostle Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:15, **Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.** Or as he says in Ephesians 2:8-9, **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.**

By grace, through faith we are saved. Through faith we can place our trust in the one who lovingly took the eternal curse that we deserved on the cross, that we might be inheritors of God's eternal blessing. He makes us that offer and calls us to trust in Jesus and turn to him as the King of our lives. Will you do so?

I'm going to lead us now in a very old prayer of confession that will be appropriate for both sheep, and goats becoming sheep, to pray –

**Almighty and most merciful Father,
we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep.
We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.
We have offended against your holy laws.
We have left undone what we ought to have done,
and we have done what we ought not to have done,
and there is no health in us.
Yet, good Lord, have mercy on us:
restore those who are penitent,
according to your promises declared to us in Jesus Christ our Lord.
And grant, merciful Father, for his sake,
That we may live a godly, righteous, and obedient life,
to the glory of your holy name. Amen.**