

What it takes to be a Sheep

Reign of Christ – 20th November 2011

Readings:

Matthew 25: 31-46

I don't know if you are like me and love statistics. I love looking at charts and graphs. And just lately population figures have intrigued me. Did you know for instance that fifty years ago there were three and half billion people on our planet. And in October 1999 we got up to 6 billion and just a couple of weeks ago, on the 31st of October, we were told the world's population reached 7 billion people! Talk about incremental growth! And while you have been listening to these statistics another 356 people have been born in our world.

And did you know that today as I speak, and before midnight strikes, statistically thousands of children will die from measles, tetanus, and diphtheria because they have not been immunised with a vaccine that costs \$1. Likewise, thousands of children will die today of respiratory infection because they can't afford a dollar's worth of antibiotics. And still more thousands of children will die today from diarrhoea and dehydration because their parents don't know how to treat them with a simple remedy of sugar, salt and water costing only a few cents.

And I haven't even taken into consideration the Horn of Africa which is in the middle of the worst drought in 60 years, affecting more than 12 million people in Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia.

And it came to pass that when media-cum-casino magnate James Packer was married (the first time), amid the twinkling of 250,000 fairy lights, the "party to end all parties" was reported to have cost around \$12 million. And that was only a month or so after father Kerry had lost millions one weekend in an overseas Casino.

Meanwhile, an Australian bank chief executive, on completion of his term of appointment, walked away with a \$35 million package. (His successor was not as fortunate. When he completed his term, his walking away package was reduced \$7.5 million to just \$8.6 million due to "customer dissatisfaction"!)

And the CEO of Qantas Airlines received a 71% salary rise at the recent AGM, then immediately shut down the airline, locking out workers for a fairer wage, and stranding passengers all over the world.

The population problem is not that there are too many poor people.
The population problem is there are too many rich people! And they too seem to be growing fatter.

Take these contrasts and suddenly you appreciate how radical today's gospel story could be. It's a gospel story that says a culture that supports millionaire media and business tycoons but cannot come up with a dollar's worth of sugar and salt, is in for one heck of a shock. The 'goat' population is going to have some high-profile notables among it!

But you know it is easy to point the finger at the obscenely rich as if their wealth is solely to blame for the world's problems. It's not their wealth that is the problem, it is what they do with it.

But followers of Christ, those living in the spirit, see the world differently. Relationship, not wealth is our currency. Compassion not profit lights our way. We seek the Christ in the other and often are surprised where the Christ is to be found. This story from the gospel of Matthew says the presence of the divine is hidden in the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, and the imprisoned. But surprisingly this story tells us it is not only the goats that fail to recognise the divine in the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, and the imprisoned, it is also those who line up with the sheep.

"When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 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 and in prison and visited you?"

This last judgement tells us much about how we are to live in the here and now. Most of us were told when we were growing up that if we were good we'd get to heaven. So I assume we all went to church, read our bibles, said our prayers, and we were assured by our elders that that is what would get us to heaven. And of course you would help the poor and needy, because that too would get you to heaven.

But here we have a picture of something different at the pearly gates. Sheep and goats not knowing when and how they did the right or wrong thing

The point I think Matthew is making is that meeting the Christ in the other is not something we choose - to get a reward, it is something that happens proactively, uncalculatingly and unobtrusively, because the love of God in Christ is so real that we can do no other. It becomes second nature. And it is the other way round. We don't go to Christ, Christ comes to us, comes always to us, in the poor, the homeless, the sick and the lonely, often at the most inconvenient of times, and often when you yourself are at your lowest. And there is not a light that goes on that says 'Oh I'd better help here - it's my religious duty.' We reach out because we can do no other. We are compelled by love. And when we do find ourselves unexpectedly amid the sheep, all is grace.

Matthew's story or dream is about what finally matters. In the end, at the last judgement, it always comes down to how we have opened ourselves to the least who in turn enrich us by their Christ presence. This is what the kingdom is about - hidden and unobtrusive, like a mustard seed, like yeast.

And the poet Christine Fry tells the same story, shares the same dream, as Matthew when she writes this poem called *"The Great Turning"*, a poem that also contrast starkly the sheep from the goats:

***You've asked me to tell you of The Great Turning,
of how we saved the world from disaster.
The answer is both simple and complex.
We turned.***

***For hundreds of years we had turned away as life on earth grew more precarious.
We turned away from the homeless men on the streets,
the stench from the river,
the children orphaned in Iraq,
the mothers dying of AIDS in Africa.
We turned away because that is what we had been taught.
To turn away, from our pain,
from the hurt in another's eyes,
from the drunken father
or the friend betrayed.
Always we were told, in actions louder than words,
to turn away, turn away.
And so we became a lonely people caught up in a world moving too quickly,
too mindlessly towards its own demise.
Until it seemed as if there was no safe place to turn.
No place, inside or out, that did not remind us
of fear or terror, despair and loss, anger and grief.***

***Yet on one of those days someone did turn.
Turned to face the pain.
Turned to face the stranger.***

***Turned to look at the smouldering world and the hatred seething in too many eyes.
Turned to face himself, herself.***

***And then another turned.
And another.
And another.
And as they wept, they took each other's hands.
Until whole groups of people were turning.
Young and old, gay and straight.
People of all colours, all nations, all religions.
Turning not only to the pain and hurt but to beauty, gratitude and love.
Turning to one another with forgiveness and a longing for peace in their hearts...***

And this is what the kingdom of heaven is like. Let's not wait for a last judgement. Let's bring it on, here and now, "***for whenever you do this for the least of these who are members of my family, you do it for me.***"

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