

Preaching the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats Matt 25:31-46

Once again we seek to find a basic theme that we can develop from this text into a coherent sermon.

In an earlier presentation on Matthew at the Sermon Seminar (1999) I picked up a story that Ulrich Luz derives from Tolstoy. The story involves a cobbler. The cobbler suffers the terrible loss of his young child. The only consolation that can tear him from his grief is that he hears the voice of Jesus. Jesus promises that he will meet the cobbler if he goes to his shop the next day. With great anticipation the cobbler gets off to his place of work but there is hardly any business that day. He sits by the window and waits. With plenty of time on his hands he observes carefully the people coming by. There is an old man exhausted from having to shovel snow; a poor woman with an even more inadequately clad child being carried in her arms; an old woman reduced to penury being forced to argue with a street urchin over the price of an apple. Each one the cobbler greets and cheerfully gives them food and hospitality. But he did not see Jesus.

That evening, still struggling to understand what was going on, the cobbler trudges home and, as was his custom, he begins to read the Gospels. His eyes fall on Matthew 25. Then he understands. Christ did not stand him up that day. He came to him in the persons he saw and helped along the way.

Now Tolstoy was one who sought the emancipation of the poor against hostile political regimes. I realize this story can be “oversentimentalized” and comes dangerously close to what I urge you not to do – claim Jesus is “in the poor” because of their poverty. Yet service to the needy may be service to the King of Kings. But what is commendable is the service based on hearing the word of the Kingdom. As Wenham notes, the poor are called to repent and believe the good news of the kingdom. Indeed, in Matthew, the poor are the vulnerable missionaries to the powerful forces of many in the nations. Nevertheless, Tolstoy’s parable does have force because it underscores a point that is

central for Matthew: the heart of the kingdom existence is to incorporate in one's life the love commandment (cf. Matt 7:12; 22:34-40; 23:23).

Apparently, there were some in the nations who welcomed the missionaries (the mission of Paul?) who did exactly that. When it comes to the last day they even forget what they have done (Matt 6:1-6). Their "shock" is that their service to the missionaries will be revealed in that day as "service to the Son of Man." What applies to the nations also applies to the needy bearers of the word in Matthew's church. Here we come to the heart of the worthwhile message to a contemporary assembly: What is entailed in seeking and assisting the vulnerable among us?

So, we finally arrive at a potential theme.

To see is not enough. Seeing must be translated into active and responsible care for fellow believers as we live a vulnerable life for others.

The sermon may be developed many ways. I like the idea of the play on "surprise." If we have really embodied the key principles that Jesus expounds in Matthew (the beatitudes and the love commandment), then it is the last thing in the world to think that our service is being done directly to the Lord of History. Rather, somewhat understated, our commendation at the end is like an American soldier walking into lunch in a far-off country and suddenly standing face-to-face with the President of the United States who is about to pin on him a medal.

Of course, another direction would be to develop a series of instances when Israel believed all was well (perhaps on the grounds of its election) and insightful sages detect all is not well (Matt 25:41-46). Do we have a sense of false security (Matt 25:41-46)?

Coming at the end of Matthew's account of Jesus' ministry it is a crucial unit. We never know when the opportunity presents itself to save a brother in need or announce to the world the lordship of Jesus.