

Week of November 23rd – Matthew 25.31-46

- Read each daily Devotional Reading using the SOAP method and Daily Devotional to help you reflect.
- Read the article below prior to group
- Think through the small group and accountability questions after the article

Devotional Readings

Sunday	Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
Monday	Psalm 100
Tuesday	Ephesians 1:15-23
Wednesday	Matthew 25.31-46
Thursday	Psalm 2
Friday	2 Samuel 7
Saturday	Daniel 7

Article: *The Sheep and the Goats - Matthew 25.31-46*

by N.T. Wright from *Matthew for everyone, Part 2* (England: London : SPCK, 2002.), 139-144.

One of the most remarkable things to happen in the whole twentieth century was the establishment of an International Court of Justice, located at The Hague in the Netherlands. Not everyone approves of such a thing, but whatever your opinion you must admit that it represents an astonishing leap forward in the way the world conducts its affairs.

Until recently even the concept of international law was a puzzle. But in the last century we have seen not only increasingly easy communication, but increasing awareness of massive and horrible crimes against humanity. The worldwide community has come together and declared that we will not stand there and watch injustice flourish.

Justice is one of the most profound longings of the human race. If there is no justice, then deep within ourselves we know that something is out of joint. Justice is hard to define and harder still to put into practice; but that has never stopped human beings and societies seeking it, praying for it, and working to find ways of doing it better. And 'justice' doesn't simply mean 'punishing wickedness', though that is regularly involved. It means bringing the world back into balance.

Central to the Jewish and Christian traditions (and some others; but these are the ones we're concerned with here) is the belief that this passionate longing for justice comes from the creator God himself. Jews and Christians believe that he will eventually do justice on a worldwide scale, in a way that the International Court can only dream of. God's judgment will be seen to be just. The world will be put to rights.

Part of the biblical image of the coming of the son of man is the announcement that justice will at last be done. There are many scenes in biblical and other Jewish literature which are like the present one. In this final part of Jesus' fifth and last discourse in Matthew's gospel, we have, not a parable as such, but another heavenly scene corresponding to, and indeed developing, the ones we had in chapter 24. Jesus is to be exalted as the ruler of the world, vindicated after his suffering. (The passage assumes the point we stressed earlier, that he has been exalted to a position of honor.) What we are now invited to witness is the way in which his just rule will be exercised.

The reference to sheep and goats, and to the shepherd who divides them up at the end of the grazing day (verses 32—33), is incidental to the main point, however much it has caught the imagination of readers. In the Middle East, to this day, sheep and goats regularly graze together, but need to be separated at night so that the goats, being less hardy, can be kept warm. It's often quite difficult to tell them apart. They can be similar in color, but one main difference is that the sheep's tail hangs down and the goat's sticks up.

So what is the scene about?

At one level it is about the 'last judgment' Western Christians at least are so familiar with this idea from paintings, mystery plays, and many classical writings that it's hard for us to get behind the tradition and see what is really being said. The criterion imposed for the judgment is an interesting one. Everything hinges on the way in which those who are judged have treated 'one of the least of these my brothers and sisters.' Who are these 'brothers and sisters' and who is being judged?

Jesus has earlier defined his brothers and sisters as 'those who do the will of my father in heaven', in a context which points to this as meaning 'those who hear and obey my kingdom- announcement' (12.50). The likely meaning of the scene, then, is that those who have not followed Jesus the Messiah will be judged in terms of how they have treated the people whom he counts as his family.

Of course, this doesn't mean that Christians themselves are not to behave in a similar way towards others. This may be taken for granted. But that is not what this scene is about. Just because we come to a passage with certain expectations, we shouldn't twist its details to fit.

The scene is the climax of a long discourse in which Jesus has denounced his own people, especially their would-be leaders, for their failure to live as God's people should, and has spoken of his own coming exaltation in accordance with the biblical picture of the vindication of the son of man. In that context, what we have here is a refocusing of one regular Jewish way of talking about God's judgment of the world.

Instead of the nations being judged on how they had treated Israel, as some Jewish writings envisage, Jesus, consistently with his whole redefinition of God's people around himself, declares that he will himself judge the world on how it has treated his renewed Israel. Judging the nations is, of course, regularly thought of as part of the Messiah's task

(e.g. Psalm 2.8—12); and the king or Messiah is often pictured as a shepherd (e.g. Ezekiel 34.23—24). That, perhaps, is why the image of sheep and goats is inserted into this scene of judgment.

But when is Jesus seated on his throne, with all his angels in attendance? We have already glimpsed this scene, in 16.27. And I have suggested that the vindication of the son of man spoken of in 24.30 refers, not to his future second coming, but (as Jesus there insists) to the events which were to take place within a generation. According to the rest of the New Testament, not least St Paul, Jesus is already ruling the world as its rightful lord (e.g. 1 Corinthians 15.25—28). Should we not say, then, that this scene of judgment, though in this picture it is spoken of as a one-off, future and final event, may actually refer to what is happening throughout human history, from the time of Jesus' resurrection and ascension to the present? Could it be that the final judgment, in some sense, comes forward to meet us?

This is not to say, of course, that there will not also be a final moment when all judgment is complete, when, as the hymn says, Justice shall be enthroned in might, And every hurt be healed.

That, after all, is likewise insisted on by Paul and others (e.g. Romans 2.16; 2 Corinthians 5.10). But it is to say that, here at least, Jesus is portrayed as launching his followers on their dangerous and vulnerable mission as his brothers and sisters, with the knowledge that he, their older brother, is already ruling the world and taking note of what they suffer.

Does this seem, from the perspective of comfortable Western Christianity, smug or self-centered? Not if we think of the many places where the brothers and sisters of Jesus are treated, even today, with contempt, abuse, torture and death. That may help us to realize what an encouragement this passage must have been to Matthew's first readers, and what hope it could bring to the many in our own day.

About the author: N.T. Wright is Bishop of Durham (Church of England) and was formerly Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey and dean of Lichfield Cathedral. A graduate of Oxford University, he previously taught at Cambridge, McGill, and Oxford Universities. Wright's *The New Testament and the People of God* (1992), *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1996), and *The Resurrection and the Son of God* (2003) are the first three volumes of his projected six-volume series entitled *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (SPCK/ Fortress Press). Among his many other published works are *The Original Jesus* (1996), *What Saint Paul Really Said* (1997), and *The Climax of the Covenant* (1992). He is the author of the For Everyone commentary series.

Small Group Questions

Accountability

Nurturing Relationships - How are you developing nurturing relationships? Are you showing up? How are you making community and teamwork important to your life? How's your commitment to small group and worship going? Are you reaching your group and individual goals in this area?

Open / Scripture

1. Have you ever taken a test and answered the questions as you thought they should be answered, only to find out that they were asking something completely different?

Observation

1. What is the scene that Jesus presents in this passage? (Mt. 25:31)
2. Who are being assembled for judgment? (Mt. 25:32) Who are the nations in contrast to?
3. What are the two categories that the Son of Man will divide the nations? (Mt. 25:32)
4. What is the criterion that separates the two groups?
5. Who are the "Brother and Sisters" of the Son of Man? Where else in the gospel does Jesus ask this question?
6. How does this message of judgment based on treatment of his least significant 'brothers and sisters' fit with the other teachings that Jesus makes on how his kingdom works?

Apply

1. In a culture that teaches us self-reliance, and celebrates indulgence, how might Jesus' message of who is the center of his focus speak to us?
2. How might we need to rethink our priorities and how might we need to rethink how we use the resources that God have entrusted us with?
3. Our culture loves to hide suffering, poverty, and other uncomfortable realities in the name of self-reliance, and indulgence. Has that pattern shaped our focus and how might King Jesus be commanding us to re-align our focus?
4. This week pray and look for ways that you can be ministering to the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters. (Orphanages, prison ministry, fellow Christians that are in need?)

Advent 2008 (Lectionary Year B) Family Worship Ideas

Week One (Nov 30)

Read 1 Cor 1:1-9 together as a family.

Verse 4-7 says: “I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge— because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.”

Talk about what a spiritual gift is, and think of a spiritual gift (or fruit of the Spirit) you would like to ask God for as you wait for Him to be revealed.

Fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

Week 2 (Dec 7)

Read Mark 1:1-8 together as a family.

Make some cookies together (perhaps with honey in them, or shaped like locusts?) and freeze them to take out on Christmas. Talk about John living in the desert, not eating regular food because he thought preparing people for Jesus was so important. Then talk about how we can prepare ourselves, and our family, for Jesus coming.

Week 3 (Dec 14)

Read John 1:6-8, 19-28 together as a family.

Decorate your home with light and talk about how we want our lives to be bright with the light of Jesus.

Ideas for decorating with light: the preschool class made paper luminaries for candles. Candles, wrapping Christmas lights around a banister, or putting the in a jar so their light shines through. Poking holes (with an awl or nail & hammer) through clean soup cans, so that a candle will flicker through.

Week 4 (Dec 21)

Read Luke 1:28-36 together as a family.

Take some time to talk about what things we have seen God do that we thought impossible. (Examples might from your own family life, or from the Bible.) Then pray

that when He shares with us something He will do, we will pray like Mary: May it be unto me as you have said.