

## JESUS OUR JUDGE AND OUR HOPE

Daniel 7:13-14; Matthew 25: 31-46

You'll recall that our United Church 'new creed' says that we are called "to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our Judge and our hope."

This text from Matthew 25, raises questions in our minds about Judgement and Hope.

We ask: When our lives are done, will we be judged? On what basis, or according to what standard will we be judged?

Or, to put it a little differently: According to what criteria can our lives be regarded as good lives, successful lives?

This text is also about hope, about life beyond death, hope beyond this world as we know it. Our creed also says: "In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us."

Of course we all have pen-ultimate hopes, hopes for here and now, like, we hope for a vaccine to get us out of this damned pandemic. We hope for good health, for a good Christmas, a good holiday next year, and so on.

But this text is about ultimate hope: Hope for a world of peace; hope for justice for victims; hope for life beyond death, for ourselves and our loved ones. Hope for the future of creation. In other words, Big Hopes.

First, let's explore the background of the text. What kind of text, what sort of literature is this? How should we interpret it? How literally should we take it?

Well, first, this is an apocalyptic text. Apocalyptic. By that I mean, it's about the end of the world, the Last Judgment, and the Coming Again of Jesus. There are a number of apocalyptic texts like this in the New Testament, especially in the gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke, and in the Book of Revelation. Jesus is depicted as coming down out of the sky on the clouds, surrounded by angels.

This particular apocalyptic text is from the gospel of Matthew, written probably about fifty years after the death and resurrection events, perhaps c. the year 85. The author is probably not the disciple Matthew, one of the twelve. He is someone of the next generation. He's quite well educated; he's writing in good Greek.

Matthew is putting down in writing what he's heard from the oral traditions, stories that have come to him by word of mouth from the Christian community. Perhaps he already has in his possession the earlier gospel of Mark, since there's a lot of overlap between Matthew and Mark, so apparently he's putting together contents from Mark, with other things he's heard by word of mouth.

He's writing in Greek because that was the the international language of the day, but Jesus himself spoke Aramaic, a dialect of ancient Hebrew. So the material seems to have originated with Jesus in Aramaic, then passed on by word of mouth, in Aramaic, and then written by down by Matthew in Greek. Then it comes to us in English.

So we can't be sure that Jesus said exactly these words. It's probable, though, that the heart of the story did come from Jesus. It's a parable, and bears the stamp of genius that we find in Jesus' parables and sayings.

It carries the grandeur and poetic brilliance that we associate with Jesus, or the Psalms or the prophets, or, e.g., Shakespeare. This is great literature.

Now, as you know, a parable does not describe an actual event, either past or future. It tells a story, it dramatizes to make a point. It aims to tell the truth, by means of a story.

So, the text begins (in the New Revised Standard Version): “When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne of glory, and 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....”

Since this is a parable we should not take it as a literal description of an actual future event. This is one of numerous images, quite different imaginative depictions, of Jesus coming again in glory to set the world right.

Who is this Son of Man? Today we might prefer to say, for the sake of inclusive language, Son of Humankind, or Son of Humanity. Some translations simply say “the human one.”

This terminology can be found in many places in what we have called the Old Testament, simply to mean “a human being.”

But here, this human being sits on this glorious throne. This human being has divine authority. He sits in judgment.

Now, this title, Son of Man, or Son of Humanity, comes from the prophet Daniel, whom we read this morning.

The prophet Daniel lived way back in the 6<sup>th</sup> century before Christ, a victim of the Babylonian exile. His words express the hope of Israel, that the sovereign God, the Creator, through this Son of Humanity, will finally bring the creation to its fulfillment, which is the reign of peace and justice.

The hope for the Son of Humanity is much like the hope for a Messiah, an anointed King, who will come from God to establish God’s s Reign in the world, when God’s Kingdom will come, and God’s will will be done.

So “Messiah” and “Son of humanity” are two distinct images expressing the same hope of the Jewish people for a world of justice and peace.

Now, the first Christians, the disciples of Jesus, identify Jesus as this Messiah, or Son of Humanity. In fact they ascribe to Jesus all the most exalted titles to be found in the Hebrew scriptures:

He is the Messianic King, He’s the Son of Humanity, and they give him other titles too: he’s the Good Shepherd, the Lamb of God, Emmanuel, ‘God with us’. It’s remarkable that they also call him Son of God, and Kurios, Lord, both titles ascribed to the Emperor of Rome!

Why would they proclaim Jesus in such exalted terms? Presumably because of his wise teaching, his power to heal, his great compassion, his love of the poor and needy, his courageous death, but most importantly, his resurrection.

They are convinced that in Jesus, God’s Reign has broken decisively into the world, and that, because of him, the world would never be the same again.

That’s the background of this text.

One interesting factor is that Jesus apparently spoke of himself as Son of Man, or Son of Humanity. In the gospels, Jesus is frequently quoted referring to himself in this way: e.g., these words may be familiar to you: “foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head;” or “the Son of Man is Lord of the sabbath;” or “The Son of Man must suffer and die.” And so on.

According to the gospels, Jesus spoke of himself in this way.

So in today’s gospel text, Matthew 25, Jesus is speaking of himself as this Son of Humanity.

According to this text, we will be judged according to how well we have loved the poor and needy. Because Jesus, the judge, is himself utterly identified with the poor and needy: the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, the sick, the unclothed, the prisoner.

Jesus is so identified with them that he regards them as members of his family. Rather like if you said, “If you help out my wife, or my children, when they’re in desperate straits, you’re helping me.” Or, “if you harm my mother, or my husband, or my children, you are harming me, or if you fail to help them when they’re in trouble, you are failing me.”

We may feel that way about our closest loved ones. Jesus feels that way about the hungry and thirsty, the sick, the strangers and the prisoners. He wants us to feel that way too.

Notice that he commends those on his right, the sheep, the righteous ones, because when he was hungry, they gave him food, etc. But the righteous are surprised. They had no idea they were helping Jesus. They weren’t doing it for the Big Guy just to get a reward in the end. No, they just acted out of compassion, because they cared.

They weren’t claiming to be righteous. They just naturally did what was right.

But the goats, the unrighteous on the left hand, they were surprised too. When Jesus says, “You did it not to me,” they defend themselves. “When did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or naked, or sick or in prison, - when? Come on, just tell me once when I saw you in need.” They object to the accusation.

That’s the irony of this text. The righteous don’t know that they’re righteous. They’re not claiming to be good, and don’t claim any reward.

On the other hand, the unrighteous think: How dare you accuse me? I’m a good person. I’ve never done much of anything wrong. I’m just fine, thank you very much. I deserve my reward.

In other words, we may be very self-deceived about how righteous or unrighteous we actually are.

And that’s why this text is rather frightening. It seems to be all about earning the love and favor of God. It seems to teach “justification by good works.” As though we earn our way into God’s good graces. As though good people go to heaven, and bad people go to hell. In this text, God’s love and grace seems to be conditional on our being very very good.

Jesus appears here as a demanding and stern judge. And he often appears that way in the gospel texts. He is very harsh, for example, with the Pharisees; he calls them selfish, self-righteous hypocrites.

These texts of judgment make us wonder whether any of us can possibly make it into “eternal life.” After all, which of us has loved our neighbour sufficiently? When have we done enough? We may think we’re pretty generous and kind, but what if we haven’t done quite enough? Will we sent off to eternal punishment?

But then the question arises: doesn't this text contradict what we read elsewhere in the gospels, like the parables of grace, e.g., the parable of the prodigal son, of the gracious, ever-forgiving father? What about Jesus' forgiveness of the greedy tax collector, Zacchaeus, or the woman caught in adultery, for whom he says: Whoever is without sin, cast the first stone?

What about Jesus making friends and eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners? Jesus, as he's presented in this same gospel, seems to be very forgiving and gracious. God's love, in Jesus, appears to be inexhaustible, even indulgent, with our faults and failings.

I think I prefer to be judged by the gracious Jesus, who is so sympathetic with us. I'm not so sure I like this demanding Jesus, this stern judge of Matthew 25, who seems to cancel out the gospel of grace.

So, which is it? The gracious forgiving Jesus, or Jesus the stern Judge?

But this only an apparent contradiction. It tells us that we have to balance the various texts. We have to read biblical texts in relation to each other. Scripture interprets scripture.

So we have to read this parable of the sheep and the goats alongside, and in light of Jesus' parables of grace and forgiveness. The texts themselves, when we read them together, have a kind of balance.

Then we will see that the demanding judge of Matthew 25 is one and the same as the gracious judge, who is sympathetic with our weakness.

It's not that God's love and grace is conditional, as though God loves us only when we are almost perfect. We might say: The love of God is Tough Love. Tough Love. To really receive the love of God, we have to respond to it.

Relationships are always a two way street, right? Someone may offer you friendship, but if you don't respond, if you turn your back and walk away, then no relationship happens. So also with our relationship to God.

Eternal life is a relationship with God. It is freely offered. We can accept it or reject it.

So what should we say about this "eternal punishment?" The text speaks of the "eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." In this same chapter we hear of "outer darkness" and "weeping and gnashing of teeth."

These are horrifying words. One might think that God runs an everlasting torture chamber, where people are tormented by fire forever and ever. It sets up an image of God as an atrocious tyrant, more cruel than any earthly tyrant we've ever heard of.

This divine tyrant is not an image that inspires kindness and mercy in us.

Well, I would make two points about this. Fire can be an agent of pain and destruction, but it can also be a cleansing and purging agent. Perhaps, to enter into eternal life, we will have to undergo a kind of purging.

Perhaps many of us, or maybe all of us, when confronted by the holiness of God, will find ourselves "weeping and gnashing our teeth."

And what does 'eternal' mean? It can mean forever and ever, no beginning and no end. But the Greek scholars tell us that the word 'aeonia' can also mean 'a very long time'. As in our English word 'aeons'.

In other words, it's a very serious warning: we could be found in outer darkness, cut off from God, for a very long time. It doesn't necessarily mean rejected for ever and ever.

I live in hope that, finally, no one – no one – will be forever lost to God.

However, anyone who lives hatefully, holding grudges, refusing to forgive, or who lives with cool indifference to the suffering of others – such a person is already in a kind of darkness, and cannot be at peace with God.

Presumably, someone like that would be unhappy in God's eternal Reign of love and justice. Perhaps such a person puts himself into hell, and needs the purging, cleansing fire of God's tough love.

And what is 'eternal life'?

I would be fraudulent if I pretended to be able to describe it, or say much about it. If we can't say what it is, maybe we can say what it's not.

Hopefully it cannot mean trillions or zillions of years endlessly sitting on a cloud playing a harp. No! Presumably to share in the eternal life of God is something quite different, and far more wonderful than that. A deep mystery. Something quite unimaginable to us here and now.

All we can say, humbly, in faith, is that "we trust in God." "In life, in death, and in life beyond death, God is with us."

Meanwhile, this text presents us with a great challenge: It challenges us to live compassionately.

It tells us that a good life, a life well lived, a truly successful life, is not measured by how much money you have, or what a big beautiful house you live in, or what a fancy car you drive. Nor is it measured by fame, or popularity.

It's really a question of how well we have loved.

As Jesus says: "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.

Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Amen.