

Our passage from Matthew this evening presents a great challenge to someone called to preach a short homily. Whole books could and have been written on the subjects raised in it and on the different attitudes different parts of the church have taken on those subjects over two millennia. Let me start by positioning it in Matthew. Our passage is the last of Jesus' teaching in this gospel. It is immediately followed by the entire story of the passion including the plot, the last supper, the betrayal, the trial, the condemnation, the crucifixion. The gospel concludes with the resurrection and Jesus commissioning the disciples. So our passage can be said to be a concluding distillation of Jesus' message to the world.

It is also worthy of note that this is not a parable; it is much more direct. Yes, he does use the metaphor of the sheep and the goats, but he doesn't leave us to contemplate the meaning of a parable. He makes the conclusion clear: *Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.* Or perhaps more importantly, *Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.* This is the clearest statement of Jesus identifying himself with the "least". There is no equivocation. If you have exercised generosity, compassion, and mercy to the least, you are sheep and you will be saved. If you have failed, you are goats, and your punishment will be without end. By our very creation we are blessed. But we are blessed in order that we shall be a blessing especially to the least of Jesus' family. If we fail to be a blessing, then the blessing we have received turns to dust, and we are condemned.

It is a very clear message, but oh what a muddle has been made of it over the last two thousand years. The root of the muddle began in the 4th century and was largely a result of the corruption of Empire. You know that the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 312 and that the Emperor Theodosius declared Christianity the official religion of Rome in 380. Two significant strains of belief and theology emerged late in the 4th century. One was fully expressed by St. Augustine, Bishop of the Roman colony of Hippo with the doctrine of original sin: as a result of Adam's disobedience we were all born into sin and only with the Grace of God in Christ Jesus can we be saved from that original sin. That is we are all inherently bad. The other came from a Welsh Monk named Pelagius, whose writing is the earliest writing we have out of Celtic Christianity. Pelagius believed that we were born blessed with the divine indwelling in us. As John Philip Newell says in his book *Sacred Heart, Sacred Soul*, *[Augustine] believed that grace was given to save us from our nature. On the other hand, Pelagius taught that grace was given to reconnect us to our nature, which was sacred and made of God.*

It is important to remember that early Christians were creatures of their native cultures. They did not arrive to Christianity as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate. Augustine came out of the highly binary

Greek culture – good/bad, virtuous/evil, black/white; while Pelagius came out of a Druidic culture that saw all of creation as sacred and the divine to be present in all of God's creation. While Augustine believed in original sin, Pelagius believed in original blessing.

Two starkly different world views: a population divinely created in the which the divine was indwelling for whom God's grace continually drew them back to their sacred self, or a population cursed from birth in sin that required God's grace to become subject to authority and for whom, only through obedience to that authority, was salvation possible. Which view do you think appealed to the leaders of both Empire and Church who sought to control, to dominate, and to conquer? No prize for guessing the Augustinian view won. Pelagius was excommunicated in 418.

Just a word about Celtic Christianity lest you imagine that it was simply a fringe belief in the west of Ireland. Celtic people and culture were spread in the early years of the common era from Turkey in the east to Ireland in the west including in Galatia in Turkey, Galicia in Spain, and Gaul in present day France. The place names all mean "land of the Gaels" or "land of the Celts". Cornwall, Wales, and the west of Scotland and the Hebrides were also lands of the Gaels.

Original Sin as a doctrine has given rise to all manner of unfortunate and some downright evil doctrines and practices including substitutionary atonement, the heresy of good works, salvation by election, the prosperity gospel, pillaging the environment. All of which continue to plague the church and the world today.

But let us return to our reading. If we were to take a Celtic view of this passage we would understand that Jesus is not saying that sheep are sheep and goats are goats irrevocably. All can be recalled to their original blessing, and a sign of that blessing would be the way that the recalled can become a blessing to those less fortunate than they.

I think many of us, if not all of us, could be described as suffering under the influence of the doctrine of original sin. How many times in the dark night of the soul, have we worried ourselves with "I am not good enough" or a variation on the theme. Let us try a short meditation, I will read a few lines, then we will have a brief period of silence while you contemplate the sacredness of your being, and then I will read a concluding line.

Awake o my soul, / And know the sacred dignity of your being. / Awake to it in every living soul this day. / Honour it, defend it, / In heart, mind, and deed. / Awake O my soul, / And know the sacred dignity of your being. (Silence)

Awake, O my soul. Awake. Amen.*