

## Scripture Readings for November 22 2020

### **Ezek 34: 15-16; 20-24 (NIV)**

<sup>15</sup> I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. <sup>16</sup> I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

<sup>20</sup> “Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says to them: See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. <sup>21</sup> Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, <sup>22</sup> I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. <sup>23</sup> I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. <sup>24</sup> I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.

### **Matt 25: 31-46 (NIV)**

<sup>31</sup> “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup> He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

<sup>34</sup> “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, <sup>36</sup> I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ <sup>37</sup> “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? <sup>39</sup> When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ <sup>40</sup> “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

<sup>41</sup> “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. <sup>42</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’ <sup>44</sup> “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ <sup>45</sup> “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ <sup>46</sup> “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

## Sermon: The King is Coming!

Justice is one of the most profound longings of the human heart. Where there is an absence of justice, we know deep within ourselves that something is out of joint. Now, we may find it hard to define what precisely *is* justice, and still harder to put it into practice, but that has never stopped human beings and societies seeking it, longing for it, and working to find better ways of implementing it. And that is true at local, national, and international levels. Justice itself doesn't simply mean "punishing wickedness," although that may be involved, it means *bringing the world back into balance*.

Central to the Judeo-Christian tradition<sup>1</sup> is the passionate longing for the kind of justice that comes from the Creator God himself. We believe that God will eventually realize justice on a global scale and in a way that human legal systems can only dream of, because God's judgment will not be a compromise but *seen* to be just; the world *will* be put to rights. This was part of the vision of Ezekiel that we heard this morning: *God himself* will "shepherd the flock *with justice*"<sup>2</sup>; God, through his servant David, will be both judge and protector.<sup>3</sup> In Daniel's vision, the transcendent Son of Man comes as both judge and king,<sup>4</sup> and Matthew mentions that image at the beginning of our reading today,<sup>5</sup> Christ the King Sunday.

What is your reaction on hearing this story? For some it is very *positive*, perhaps for mistaken reasons that I will mention later. Others, however, react *negatively*. The story is fear-inducing to them rather than comforting. If that is you, let me say at the outset that God's justice is a *good* thing, because it means that what is messed up in this world will be properly addressed at last. So, is the source of the fear rooted in a negative understanding of divine justice, or of God himself? [Or, perhaps, both!] If we recognize that both justice and God are in themselves *good*, then perhaps the real source of our fear is a mistaken understanding of our status before God. We have yet to fully embrace the fact we are his beloved, forgiven children and so there is absolutely nothing to fear.<sup>6</sup> Matthew doesn't relate this story of Jesus to induce paralysis and inactivity due to fear – like the man that we heard about last week who buried the talent.<sup>7</sup> No, this is to *encourage* us to keep going, to hang in there, and to keep busy, because God's good justice is coming! And that is a message of hope; the King is coming!

Let's briefly consider some of the details of this drama. When King Jesus comes, he will act *as a shepherd* and separate the "sheep from the goats."<sup>8</sup> I am told that in Palestine at that time, shepherds routinely had mixed flocks and at night they separated the sheep from the goats. Sheep enjoy the open-air of the pasture while goats had to be protected from the cold. And because sheep had more commercial

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<sup>1</sup> And not just this tradition, others too.

<sup>2</sup> Ezek 34:16.

<sup>3</sup> Ezek 34:23-24.

<sup>4</sup> Dan 7:9-10,13-14.

<sup>5</sup> Matt 25:31-46. Note this is classed as an "apocalyptic drama" not a parable! This incident is unique to Matthew's Gospel.

<sup>6</sup> As Paul puts it, in a different context, "nothing can separate us from the love of God," Rom 8:31-39.

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/A-Generous-Master-and-the-Fearful-Servant.pdf> .

<sup>8</sup> Matt 25:33.

value, they were preferred over the goats, and that why the sheep go the honored right and the goats to the left. Matthew tells us that “The King will say to those on his right, ‘Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what’s coming to you in this kingdom. It’s been ready for you since the world’s foundation. And here’s why: I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was homeless and you gave me a room, I was shivering and you gave me clothes, I was sick and you stopped to visit, I was in prison and you came to me.’”<sup>9</sup>

What is intriguing is the reaction of the righteous sheep; they are *surprised*.<sup>10</sup> They had not realized that when they had provided hospitality and did all those acts of compassion, King Jesus considered all those gracious deeds as being done as if *to him*. On the other hand, the goats had plenty of opportunities to carry out such acts of kindness and did nothing – and they too are surprised. The implication is that *had* they *known* they were ministering to King Jesus, they would have done it gladly – no doubt because they were motivated by the hope of some later reward. But didn’t recognize Jesus in the face of those in need. And the King says, “Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, that was me—you failed to do it to me.”<sup>11</sup> And they were not allowed to enter the kingdom.<sup>12</sup> Jesus says, then, there is a deeper element to acts of compassion. What are we to make of this?

First, this passage has inspired generations of Christians to pay closer attention to the sins of *omission* instead of concentrating exclusively on the sins of *commission*, in other words, to remember that we what we *fail* to do can also get us into trouble! At its most basic level, that can simply mean speaking up instead of being silent when we see injustice happening. It is caring rather than being indifferent. In a world of fake news, anti-science, anti-math, and anti-truth, this has become a difficult challenge for our times. It is tempting to shrug and say nothing, but how does that help the cause of justice? It obviously doesn’t. One point of this story is that divine justice is concerned about what we *don’t* say and do when we are in a position to say and do something, whether that’s something big or small.

And that leads me to my second point, Matthew’s concern for *ethics* is revealed here. In this story, the basis for the King’s judgement is distilled down to just the *second* of the great love commands,<sup>13</sup> namely, “to love you neighbor as yourself.” Many people like the *simplicity* of that conclusion. In fact, if you think about it, there is nothing specifically *Christian* in this judgement criterion. Even the ancient Egyptians believed that such good deeds would win them life after death. Faith plays no role, and that would have horrified Martin Luther – for a start! We need to be careful; if this text is truly as universal

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<sup>9</sup> Matt 25:34-36, The Message. See also Matt 12:50.

<sup>10</sup> Matt 25:37,44. The goats are also surprised!

<sup>11</sup> Matt 25:45, The Message.

<sup>12</sup> See Matt 25:34. In Matt 25:46 Here the ultimate destination of the righteous is *eternal life*. In several places Matthew uses “life” or “eternal life” in proximity with “the kingdom of heaven” or merely “the kingdom,” suggesting a close relationship between the two concepts (compare Matt 19:16-17,29 with 19:23-24.) Note that Matthew consistently portrays “eternal life” as something a person enters in the world to come, whereas John sees “eternal life” as beginning in the present and continuing into the future (see John 5:24.)

<sup>13</sup> Matt 22:36-40.

at it sounds, why – as Matthew implies - did Jesus *only* share this teaching with his disciples?<sup>14</sup> And we can't ignore what Jesus has just been telling his followers about grounds for judgement. Matthew records that, first, Jews will be judged on the basis of their rejection of the Messiah.<sup>15</sup> Second, that Christians will be evaluated regarding their faithfulness to Jesus in the performance of assigned tasks.<sup>16</sup> We heard about that last week in the Parable of the Talents, and earlier in the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids.<sup>17</sup> Matthew clearly does *not* wish to suggest that Christians have no other obligation than to help the needy, important though that undoubtedly is. Put a different way, we can't only focus on the second love command and ignore the first, namely to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind."<sup>18</sup> This shows us that we need to be careful about isolated texts; it is too easy to read this short passage and ignore the rest of the Gospel! That said, in Matthew's Gospel Jesus *does* live out this ethical teaching. He fed the hungry.<sup>19</sup> He cured the sick and comforted those in need.<sup>20</sup> He welcomed the stranger.<sup>21</sup> And, as Matthew goes on to relate, Jesus was crucified between two prisoners. But this love was because Jesus *saw* God's face in each person. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves, why is it that so many people who claim to follow Jesus fail to see Christ in the face of those in need? Put differently, the most earnest of Christians can be passionate about principles but show a remarkable lack of awareness of the basics of extending love to those who need it most. We can all be guilty of that!

My third point is that it may be, given that the Temple was destroyed in AD 70, that Matthew's audience were in danger of waiting *passively* for the risen Jesus to return as king. Christians today can be prone to the same failing, which is why the urgency of being *prepared* for the coming of wedding groom and being *busy* doing Kingdom-work when the master returns are the themes of the previous parables.<sup>22</sup> Yes, the King *is* coming, but while we wait, we are to proactively care the "least of lease," following the example of Jesus himself. Regardless of *all* the injustices in the world, there is *no* excuse for *not* doing that. What that means in practice, we, as individuals and as a local church, have to figure out for ourselves. Whatever we do will, by God's grace, contribute to bringing the world back into balance.

My final point connects with that general matter of justice. There are many today who wonder how divine justice will address those of other faiths. C. S. Lewis had something to say about this near the end of his final book in the Narnia series, titled, *The Last Battle*.<sup>23</sup> In the story, there was an honorable

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<sup>14</sup> Matt 24:3. Put a different way, why not mention it within the public Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7)?

<sup>15</sup> Matt 23:29–39.

<sup>16</sup> Matt 24:45–51; 25:14–30. See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/A-Generous-Master-and-the-Fearful-Servant.pdf> .

<sup>17</sup> Matt 25:1-12. See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Be-Prepared.pdf> .

<sup>18</sup> Matt 22:27. See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Give-to-God-What-is-Gods.pdf> .

<sup>19</sup> Matt 14:13–21; 15:32–39. See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Gods-Compassion-and-Lavish-Provision.pdf> .

<sup>20</sup> Matt 15:21–28.

<sup>21</sup> Matt 8:5-13.

<sup>22</sup> See [15,16].

<sup>23</sup> See specifically, Lewis, *The Last Battle*, HarperCollins (originally published in 1956), p188-9.

warrior - called Emeth<sup>24</sup>- who dies and, to his surprise, in the afterlife meets Aslan, the Lion who represents King Jesus. Emeth fears that Aslan will know that he did *not* serve him, but was faithful instead to the [false] god, Tash, and so he wonders what will happen to him now. Emeth faithfully followed what he thought to be true all his life, and he is naturally curious as to how Aslan compares with Tash. In the story it is Aslan who seeks Emeth out and says, “*Son, you are welcome.*” Emeth responds, “*Alas, Lord, I am no son of yours but the servant of Tash.*” Aslan answers, “*Child, all the service you have done to Tash, I count as service done to me.*” Emeth, desiring to know more wisdom and knowledge, then asks: “*Does that mean you and Tash are One?*” To which the Lion, growled and roared a loud denial, and then explains that all good deeds done in the name of other gods, Aslan accepts as done for him. Moreover, inappropriate deeds that were claimed to be done by Aslan’s followers in his name, he outright rejects. Aslan then says to Emeth, “*Beloved, unless your desire had been for me, you would not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek.*”<sup>25</sup>

Many Christians were upset with C. S. Lewis for writing this, yet he said that this aspect of his story was based in his understanding of this passage concerning the sheep and the goats. I happen to think he was right,<sup>26</sup> because I believe that God *knows all that can be known*, including our *motives* for our *actions*. Indeed, it is because I believe in the scope of God’s *knowledge* that I can believe in the *fairness* of his *justice*. This *doesn’t* mean that the death and resurrection of Jesus are irrelevant, *far from it!* (You can hear Aslan roar here!) Jesus is the Savior of the world! Through God’s raising of Jesus from the dead, God conferred on him ultimate kingship and, one day, everyone will recognize Messiah Jesus as the rightful King over All.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, I believe *everything* needs to be seen through that lens. Moreover, I believe that the events in the life of Jesus that we have been considering throughout the liturgical year reveal *why* we can trust in God’s justice. Jesus has first-hand experience human injustice and that, amongst other things, makes him – I believe - a wise, trustworthy judge capable of resolving every complex, messy situation that needs the light of true justice.

The bottom line is for us to live in hope - for the King is coming! God’s good justice is coming! Are we therefore watchful? Are we prepared? Are we busy? Are we ready? Let us pray.

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<sup>24</sup> See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emeth> .

<sup>25</sup> See also: Matt 5:3,6,8.

<sup>26</sup> This is beginning, *not* the end, of a much larger conversation – so please don’t misunderstand me here! Yes, evangelism matters, being a Christian matters; the Jesus-story matters. I still believe Jesus is the Savior of the whole world. But the Spirit of God is not exclusive ‘property’ of the Church, but always goes ahead of *God’s* mission to the world.

<sup>27</sup> See Phil 2:5-11.

### ***Added Notes on Interpreting this Text.***

In this apocalyptic drama it is *abundantly* clear that the King, Jesus, is invested with God's power to execute judgment and the Son of Man, i.e., Jesus, pronounces the verdicts. Having said that, there is a significant interpretive issue in 25:32 (the meaning of "All the nations"), as well as the phrase the "least of these" in 25:40,45.

Commentators have pointed out that the phrase Matthew uses for "nations" he uses elsewhere to signify "Gentiles" (non-Jews) and that he uses the phrase that "little ones" (cf. "least of these") to mean the "followers of Jesus."<sup>28</sup> Consequently, some scholars say that this is a passage that depicts the judgment of specifically non-Jews and non-Christians, and how they treat Christians. Read this way, the passage serves not so much as a reminder to us about how to "love our neighbors" as a threat against those who would deny justice to those in need and thereby hinder the spread of the gospel. Far from a warning about Christian actions, the passage is then a comfort to faithful Christians.

While this restrictive interpretation has gained some traction among scholars, it seems best to follow the centuries-old tradition as considering this passage to be more universal. The other danger, of course, is that such an interpretation should not be reduced to a *humanitarian* concern alone, important though that is, because that is not consistent with the rest of Matthew's account. If this passage was viewed isolated from the rest of Matthew (and the New Testament), salvation would be purely based on "works" - and this would have profound theological ramifications. We would be neither saved by God's grace, nor even by the message of the cross, but simply on how we treat other people. We would be deemed right before God by human efforts that are shaped not only by the pursuit of justice, but by particular understanding of justice that is solely focused on the treatment of the "least of these." While this is certainly been a stream of thought within Christian traditions, it is *never* being the dominant one. And, as mentioned before, it is not consistent with the rest of the gospel. On the other hand, such an approach might make interreligious dialogue easier!

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<sup>28</sup> See Matt 10:40–42.