

Sheep or Goats?

Being in prison is something I don't ever want to experience. I once considered offering my services as a prison visitor and went to an introduction course. Pressure of work, I said, stopped me proceeding but I have to say that I was, and still am in no rush to go into prison. My brother has a lot of experience as a Prison visitor and chaplain. No doubt we have a number of people on our circuit that have experience as visitors and some may have been prisoners. The harrowing experience undergone some years ago by one of our members at Driffild brings home the thought that we all need to be aware of the possibility. We need to remember the wellbeing of prisoners and the wellbeing of their families who also suffer.

Despite the, well publicised, miscarriages of justice most prisoners in this country are there for good reasons. There are of course many in other parts of the world who are imprisoned wrongly. Whatever the circumstances they need our compassion. The king in the Gospel passage today does not say "I was in prison unjustly" he just says "I was in prison and you visited, or did not visit," as the case may be. One of the first imperatives for visiting imprisoned people, I imagine (or visiting anyone for that matter), is to get rid of any sort of judgement about the others situation. If we saw someone walk carelessly into the road and get knocked down and hurt by a car, most of us would offer help and comfort to the victim, and, I hope, we would not say "stupid fool it's your own fault, why did you do it?" even if we thought it. Even those in prison by their own stupid fault need visitors, even they might be the king who will separate the goats from the sheep on the day of judgement.

But we don't have to be in prison to be prisoners. Most of those who watch this will have experience of financial debt. We have bought things on hire purchase and taken out mortgages to buy houses. Mary and I are fortunate enough to have paid off the mortgage on our house that was a feature for so many years. When we did it was a good feeling to know that we were free of the debt. Imagine being in a position of knowing that you will never be able to pay your lender any more than the interest on the money he has lent you. That, however hard you work, your debt may in fact continue to get bigger. That's imprisonment is it not? The Coronavirus pandemic has not made prisoners of most of us but it has given many a taste of house arrest. The huge sums of money committed to combatting the effects of the virus are bound to have limited our countries freedom to invest in the future. Politicians of all hues must know, deep down, that straightening out the finances is likely to be a stumbling block in the way of their ambitions.

Of course, if we look at indebtedness in terms wider than finance the picture can change dramatically.

One of the things I read when I first used this lectionary, back in 1999, was a piece that Mark Wakelin wrote in connection with Jubilee 2000. Do you remember that? The Methodist Association of Youth Clubs World Action Project, Life or Debt, was allied to that campaign. I think it is worth sharing with you what Mark wrote for Worship & Preaching, The Methodist Church resource I used then when preparing my services.

"The older I get," said Martin Luther King, "the more I owe." It would be a chastening exercise to write down all the people who have contributed to our wellbeing! My existence, security, knowledge and opportunity were by and large given to me and now I am in debt to those givers. The debt is huge and forever mine, so much so that either I live on a wave of gratitude or I would drown in shame. Even the small contributions I can make to others are possible only because others have contributed freely to me. As one who owes so much, Jesus challenges me to forgive with equal largesse.

The great thing to remember about sheep and goats is that they looked very similar to Jesus. This isn't the case here at home because British sheep are conventionally fluffy and woolly, and goats suitably goatish and bearded. In Palestine, where Jesus was telling his listeners about the Day of Judgment, they look very much alike. He wanted to remind people to be cautious about quick judgments about right and wrong.

Remember what I said about visiting earlier. Mark went on *Care needs to be taken. Kind and good deeds can often mask fundamental mistakes. Charity, for example, can be a profoundly mixed up and damaging affair. Forgiveness is itself fraught with difficulties. Sheep can be mistaken for goats. How humiliating it is to be forgiven by someone you don't feel you have wronged and who, in your opinion, has wronged you instead. "It's OK, I forgive you, you couldn't help walking too slowly across the zebra crossing for my car to avoid hitting you."*

Jubilee 2000 is not asking for the generous and gracious charity of the rich west to do a little something to help the poor. "We forgive you, you cannot help being unable to avoid hurting our bank balances" It is, instead, demanding justice: on the one hand the justice that acknowledges that we are debtors ourselves who must acknowledge that we can never repay, and on the other, that as we need forgiveness, so we must forgive others.

Does the West need to be forgiven? *An economic history of the West does not make comfortable reading. Our wealth is grounded in exploitation, violence and the abuse of power. We can't do much about it for we were not born when much of this burden of sin was incurred! We inherit a moral debt, and yet enjoy the wealth it has provided. We live with debts we can never repay. We live in the debt of cities built on slavery, empires built on violence, economies dependent on the raw materials of other nations. While we can never repay such debts, we can simply ask, "Forgive us our debts."*

As we forgive? *For the rich countries to forgive the debts of the developing countries is the proper act of those who know their own indebtedness. It is the only action that can begin to make serious our own recognition of the huge debts we owe to others. It's about justice, it's about fairness, and it's fundamentally about a celebration of the new beginnings for both sides. That's what the Gospel is all about.*

At that time, November 1999, the campaign was to cancel the Third World Debt. Many of us at Trinity Methodist Church in Lowestoft gave our support the MAYC Life or Debt campaign. Young people from Trinity went to Birmingham and brought back cards which we used to try and get western governments to increase the action they had begun. Governments acknowledged that the Jubilee 2000 campaign was one of the most successful lobbying actions ever. You will be aware that third world debt was not cancelled in fact the financial crash that came 8 years later confused things even more, but the world has moved on and there are now some things that have improved despite all the strife and warfare. The current pandemic and the continuing tide of migrants fleeing oppression and poverty to seek a better life has highlighted the responsibilities of Rich nations. Campaigns to try and stop Foreign Aid by this country seems to me to be trying to reverse the aims that Jubilee 2000 had.

Christian worship is about forgiveness and hope. It's fundamentally about good news. Good news is two things: it is something good and it is something new. Guilt and shame are neither good nor news. Christians often live out their lives on an ocean of guilt, a guilt that motivates action, underpins all good intentions, and sours moments of happiness. We're not called to such a life. Instead, rich and poor alike are called to a New World where sins are forgiven and forgotten, where hurts are healed, and the old order is informed that it **will** pass away. There is a simple condition for such incredible news. We are asked to take a part in the process and join in the victory celebrations. We are asked to "forgive our debtors so that our debts may be forgiven". That we may fulfill the prophecy in

Isaiah 42:1-9

There is no way around this. It's not because God is churlish and lacking generosity. The reading from Matthews Gospel makes it clear. We are called upon to do all we can to release others, all others, especially the insignificant, from whatever it is that is imprisoning them. By doing so we will be enabling God to forgive us. It's a simple fundamental aspect of life. My debts are only forgivable if I am willing to forgive others. To join in is to be part of the blessing of others. To bless others is to join in the good news of hope and peace.