

The Overwhelming Case for Compassion

By Dr. Dave Neale

This Sunday celebrates the Reign of Christ as the finale of the Christian year. So, we have come full circle from Advent 2022, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and then, finally the so-called Common Year which runs until Advent, a fulsome Christian view of history.

Three years ago, on Nov 22, 2020 we had these same texts as today and I preached a sermon titled ***The Bad Shepherd*** (available on the vicnazarene.ca website). So today we return to the same texts of Ezekiel 34, Psalm 100 and Matthew 25 to *reread* them and see what fresh lessons they have for us.

I call this message today ***The Case for Compassion***, meaning the biblical case, and the case is very strong indeed.

Behind the Text

Let me show you a quick comparison of Ezekiel 34 and Matthew 25.

The Structure of Ezekiel

- 1-24 Oracles of Warning of the Destruction of the temple by the Babylonians
- 25-33 Oracles Against the Foreign Nations
- 34-48 Oracles of Hope in the years following the destruction and deportation

For a bit of historical context, we recall that chapters 1-24 of Ezekiel are from the period just before the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians in 587 BCE, the so-called “oracles of warning.” Chapters 25-33 are the “oracles against the foreign nations” and chapters 34-48 are the “oracles of hope.”

Ezekiel was living in the middle of history; a living prophet in the time of immense upheaval for his people. I don't read Ezekiel, I confess, because we have lost the code for the imagery and it is a difficult book – it is often impenetrable. I pretty much leave it to the experts.

But this much is clear. In a time when the ruins of Jerusalem are still smoldering in the sun, our prophet holds forth in the Oracles of Hope, beginning with what constitutes the proper care and leadership of God's people – and compassion for the needy is the central idea.

The great metaphor of the Bible in this regard is that of the *leader as shepherd*. It all originates here in Ezekiel 34, and it echoes and resonates throughout the Samuel, Psalms, Isaiah and the NT.

We note this week in the Psalms... ***we are his people and the sheep of his pasture...*** Psalm 95 and 100, and so beautifully in Isaiah 40:11:

***He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.***

This shepherd theme is found not only in the OT, but over 60 places in the NT rely on this metaphor from Ezek 34. All of the references have to do with either the *gathering and care of the sheep of Israel* or the *scattering* the sheep of Israel.

The criticism of the leaders of Israel in Ezekiel's day (we are talking about the period after the destruction of the temple), is that they haven't taken care of the sheep, they haven't gathered them in, they have abused and scattered them. They have allowed the "sheep" to languish in need and desperation. And, so God says, *I will gather my flock myself*.

Indeed, it can be said that this metaphor is somewhere near the centre of both the OT message and the new. The Lord God says in Ezekiel...

I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. (Ezek 34:22-23) Jesus is the ultimate messianic fulfilment of the promise made to the little shepherd boy David (see 2 Samuel 7:12).

Jesus derives his self-understanding from Ezekiel 34 when he says of himself, ***I am the good shepherd*** (John 10:11). Which we are to understand is "I'm **that** good shepherd of Ezekiel 34!"

Hebrews calls Jesus ... ***the great shepherd of the sheep***. (Heb 13:20)

Now, the bad shepherds behave in their *own* interests, not those of their charges: ***Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide...*** (Ezek 34:21).

The hallmark of the good shepherd/leader is to do what is in the best interests of one's people.

For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep [scattered by the tragedy of war and destruction], ***...and seek them out... I will feed them... I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak...*** (Ezek 34:11-16).

The hallmark of the bad shepherd/leader is to do what is in their own self-interest.

Does this not resonate with our experience today? Just so you know, I spend Tuesday-Thursday putting political references in my message and Friday taking them all out. You haven't called me to talk politics.

Now, let's go to Matthew, where we really see the case for compassion in all its fullness.

The scene is the end of history: ***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.*** (Matt 25:32) Here you see the echo of Ezek 34 in the shepherd language.

There are two ways to interpret the passage. One is according to its literal sense, that Jesus is separating τὰ ἔθνη, "the nations." All the nouns and verbs are plural. In which case the case for compassion has to do with our corporate response to those in need in our society. The very laudable sense is that we, as a society, should organize ourselves to provide for those in need.

As Isaiah says, ***He shall judge between the nations... swords become plowshares... they shall learn war no more*** (Isa 2:2-4). Certainly, the vision of Isaiah saw the reconciliation of the ages as playing on the stage of the “nations.” ***...all the nations shall stream to the mountain of the Lord.***

In the first Servant Song in Isaiah 42:1, which we take to be a messianic chapter about Jesus, ***...he will bring forth justice to the nations.***

More commonly, the passage is taken to refer to our personal response to those in need. I think the case for compassion encompasses all of these possibilities.

So, at the end of days, when Jesus assembles all for judgment, he says all you, nation or individual, who inherit the kingdom do so because you gave me food when I was:

- Hungry, you gave me food
- Thirsty, you gave me water to drink,
- Alone (a stranger), you showed me hospitality
- Naked, you clothed me
- Sick, you took care of me
- Imprisoned, you visited me

I observe a few things about this amazing text by way of application.

First. Notice that it is the senses to which the king refers. Hunger, thirst, loneliness, cold, sick in body and imprisoned. How can it be that the standard of judgment for the separation of the sheep and the goats in this metaphor is our response to ***felt*** human need? These are all things that are experienced by people.

It makes the path of discipleship very simple, very clear. A more practicable or doable path of discipleship could not be offered to us! If we want to feel the warmth of God’s approbation, even unto the end of the age, let us be kind and minister to human need. If we leave with this simple truth penetrating our hearts and minds, the day has been well spent together.

Second. As it goes with the shepherd, so it goes with the sheep. Bad, self-interested behaviour by the shepherds begets bad self-interested behaviour in the sheep. Do we not see this in our world today?

Good, selfless behaviour by the shepherds begets good, selfless behaviour by the sheep. The application is that if we lead laudable lives of compassion, others will be inspired to live laudable lives of compassion. Whether we welcome it or not, our lives always serve as an example, for good or for ill.

Third. In the Matthew passage you have the extension of the responsibilities of the good shepherd to all.

When those gathered express astonishment in receiving praise from this metaphorical king that they had shown kindness actually to the king himself, we have the great answer of the king, ***Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.*** (v 40)

The Greek is “to the least of one of my brothers.” It refers not to the family of the church but to the family of humanity. Τα ἔθνη, “the nations.” To the least of the family of humanity.

First Nations version: ***When you did not help the ones who needed it most, you failed to help me... (v 45), ...the least important of my fellow human beings.***

The Message version: ***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.***

As to the final judgment, what have we learned? – that the case for compassion is overwhelmingly made. At the social level, at the national level, at the personal level. This is what matters to God.

Christine and I have tickets to see Jesus Christ Superstar in January at the Royal Theatre. In the scene where Jesus separates the sheep from the goats, after the sheep happily enter into the kingdom. After they are offstage, Jesus surreptitiously beckons to the goats to follow and they happily follow.

That may be wishful thinking I suppose, but I hope it’s true. How could a Christian heart feel otherwise. It isn’t that Christians are threatening anyone with heaven or hell – it has nothing to do with our own judgment or bias.

We don’t want anyone to be lost... our biblical warrant for this sentiment comes from our text last week said, ... God ***is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance*** (2 Peter 3:8-9). It is why we bid everyone, come to Christ.

We don’t say this to judge anyone’s performance, or to make you or me feel guilty. It’s not intended to shame us or make us feel like failures. It’s intended to inspire us. It’s intended to show us how to live in a way pleasing to God.ⁱ

The overwhelming case for compassion rests on the undeniable blessings of obedience to this exhortation and how the astonishingly high stakes of how our *conduct* bears upon our final interview with God, and the moral imperative of selflessness inherent in the gospel.

Amen

ⁱ I don’t often look at Facebook, but someone sent a meme that had a timeline of Israel from Abraham to Jesus to 1948 (when UN Resolution 181 called for the establishment of two states in Palestine). I was asked, is this timeline right? It was, but I felt my heartbreak once again when I read their conclusion. “...Don’t buy the Palestinian’s lies that they are entitled to the land. It simply isn’t true.”

My heart broke once again when I saw the disregard, the inhumanity of such a statement. When will the world come to understand that we must share this earth? And the comment was expressive of the root cause of all wars, the elevation of nationalism above the human kindness and concern that our Lord showed us to always display towards the dispossessed, the hungry, the suffering.