**Sermon at Stowe 26th November 2023**

Matthew 25:31-46

Ephesians 1: 15-23

(Romans 2: 1-16)

Hell (sheep and goats)

Before I start, I need to remind you that when Jesus spoke to the crowds, he usually spoke in parables or in picture language. The Jewish way of getting across an idea was to use illustrations to make it easier to understand the truth he was trying to put over.

Do you remember when Jesus said ‘How can you say to your brother, “Let me take the speck out of your eye,” when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.’

He was clearly using hyperbole there to get across his meaning. And we need to keep that idea in mind as we read today’s parable.

This story that Jesus told is one of several which sharply divide all people into two: those who go to be with Jesus after death and those who don’t. He told stories of the two gates, the two roads, the two house-builders. Each is making the same point: follow me , says Jesus, and all will be well. Don’t follow me, and all is not well.

The sheep and the goats is a well-known parable. In the Middle East, the two can look remarkably similar, and so if they get mixed up they need to be separated. I also learned something in my preparation, and that is a shepherd of a mixed flock will separate sheep from goats at the end of the day because goats need to be kept warm at night, whereas sheep can survive at lower temperatures.

First of all, this parable assumes that everyone has a life after death. Everyone. However, what kind of life is a key question to ask. If you are a sheep, the after-life looks magnificent, far better that anything we have ever experienced. If you are a goat, well – not so rosy. But life goes on.

Second, this story is about helping other people. That is at the centre of this parable. A parable has one meaning, one message, and this one is no exception. The point of it is this:

I must be clear here. What this parable is NOT saying is that in order to get to heaven we

There was a man called Martin of Tours, a Roman soldier who was also **a** Christian. One cold winter’s day as he was entering a city, a beggar stopped **h**im and asked for money. Martin carried no money; but the beggar was blue and shivering with cold. So Martin gave what he had. He took off his soldier’s coat or cloak, worn and frayed as it was; and he cut it in two and gave half to the beggar. That night Martin had a dream. In his dream he saw the heavenly places with angels, and Jesus was there in the midst. Jesus was wearing half a Roman cloak; one of the angels asked him, ‘Why are you wearing that battered old cloak? Who gave it to you?’ Jesus said, ‘My servant Martin gave it to me.’

What is hell like? We don’t know, to be honest. All we do know has come from what Jesus said about it. You probably don’t hear many sermons about hell. Well, you’re hearing one now.

Another story is told of a man who was a keen fisherman. When he died he appeared before heavenly beings who, knowing he liked fishing, took him to a salmon river and gave him all the fishing tackle he wanted. After a day of fishing, having caught quite a few fish, he retired to bed, The next morning he was taken again to the same river, and he fished and caught several fish. After several days of this he asked if he could go to a different river, but was taken to the same part. ‘Hasn’t heaven got more than one river?’, he complained. And he was told, ‘What makes you think this is heaven?’

This is the last parable in Matthew’s gospel. It has a lesson for each of us today, just as it did in Jesus’ day. It conjures up a picture of the last days, when Jesus confronts each and every person and asks them searching questions. What did you do for the poor, the disadvantaged, the poor and needy, the hungry, the homeless and the oppressed. It’s all about how much we loved Jesus, because as he says ‘Inasmuch as you did or didn’t do this to the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it for me.’ Love God, love neighbour. Two sides of the same coin. The commandments, summarised in four words.

I say again: this is not justification by works, where some feel that we earn our right to be in heaven by our deeds. No, your entry to heaven is by grace alone, through believing in Jesus’ death and resurrection for you. But the NT also has a little to say about rewards – look in 1 Cor 3 to find what Paul has to say. ‘No one can lay a foundation other than that which has already been laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on that foundation – gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble – their work will be shown for what it is because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test the quality of each one’s work.’

So we can’t, by our good works and actions, earn a place in heaven. But having received Christ into our lives, we then have the responsibility to use all the gifts he gives us to do his work, to continue Jesus’ mission on earth. ‘Go in to all the world and make disciples of all nations.’