

Dear Friends,

The gospel reading this week is the story Jesus told about the sheep and the goats. It's a story that makes us feel rather uncomfortable because it talks about separation and judgement. It isn't an easy story and it does cause problems for some of us.

It is clearly a story about love and care, and it reminds us that love for God and love for each other cannot be separated. If you love God but don't care about other people that is a dangerous thing. The inquisitors of the Spanish Inquisition were greatly devoted to God, but it wasn't reflected in their attitude to their fellow human beings.

Love for others, and especially for those in need, is an essential part of the Christian life. We are commanded to love God and to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. But how can we be commanded to love? Surely love is something that is freely offered, not demanded. The problem is that love is too broad a word, it's meaning is too broad. When we talk about love here we aren't talking about a feeling or an emotion, we aren't talking about affection, we mean something rather different. What we're talking about here is an inner attitude, an attitude that leads to practical concern, to care and compassion in action.

Feelings can't simply be commanded, we can't just tell someone to love someone else or to love something. We can't just tell someone to love vegetables if they really don't like them. Feelings may change, they may alter, but they can't just be commanded. An attitude of the will is rather different. We are called by this story to have a loving attitude that shows itself in action. It isn't just about feeling sorry, it's about love in action.

This story also troubles many people because it seems to ignore faith. It seems to be arguing against what Paul says in his letters and indeed all that Protestant theology which says that faith is what really matters. This story seems to suggest that what really matters is caring for those in need. It seems to suggest that we can earn our way into heaven by good works in spite of all those bits in the New Testament which say that we can't.

The reason is that this story assumes that we have already responded to God's call and put our faith in him. In the early days of the church most people expected the world to end quite soon, they thought it would end in their lifetime. This story is telling us how we should live as Christians in that short time, how we should put our faith into action. It isn't about earning our way into heaven, it is about Christian faith in action.

As Christian people we don't have the option of not caring. Caring is a central part of Christian discipleship, it is central to who we are. The story is asking how can our faith be real if we don't care, how can our faith be real if we don't help those who need our help.

Best wishes,

Mark