

On bowls, sheep and goats

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 26 November 2023

A Reflection by Rev Penny Jones

Community of Christ

Ephesians 1: 15-23; Matthew 25: 31-46

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

I want to begin with this little bowl of mine. It was made by Kerry Holland, whose paintings and ceramics on the theme of The Visitation surround us here at Pitt St at this time. She also made this one, which she gave to me as a gift when I left my role in Brisbane. It is precious to me for that reason but also because, like all of Kerry's bowl sculptures it is unique, with its own particular shape, texture, and constellation of colours. In that sense, it is like each human being: an exquisitely unique and special divine creation.

The more I reflect upon that, and upon the nature of a bowl itself, the more I am also drawn into the love of God who creates us. So, I would like to share with you some ways in which each of us might helpfully use a bowl as a prayerful way into appreciating ourselves and others and holding together what can easily be misused in the Gospel parable which we heard read just now. For, whilst that passage can appear quite straightforward in the challenge it offers us, it also presents some questions, particularly in the way it divides people into two black and white binary groups, one of which receives blessed things and the other total condemnation...

Now the writer of Matthew's gospel loves a good drama, don't they?! Or perhaps I should say a good melodrama. After all they are the writer whose resurrection story gives us the highest angel count, with earthquake for good measure, and whose birth narrative offers us those bringers of mysterious – and fairly useless – gifts from the East. If it were not for Matthew our Bible would be pretty much free of '*weeping and gnashing of teeth*' and notions of eternal punishment in general. And sometimes, as we saw last week with the so-called parable of the talents, we need to be very careful indeed about who we think is the ruler, king or judge in their stories, and what we think their purpose is. And if God is being presented to us as a tyrannical ruler, always question that, for God only ever loves beyond our capacity to imagine love.

So today we have the melodramatic story of the sheep and goats, the last judgment. A story that over the centuries has been used to control and intimidate and to put the '*fear of God*' into the hearer. It has been very effective. Why? I believe it has worked because as human beings we like to be right; still more dangerously we like to be on the 'right side' of any argument, and we tend to be easily motivated by fear.

In this picture we want to be 'sheep' and be able to 'other' those we don't like or who disagree with us as 'goats'. But it's nonsense of course. The story is told of the primary school teacher who asked their class '*if all the good people were red and all the bad people were green, what colour would you be?*'. One child promptly replied, '*Miss, I'd be streaky*'.

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I think I'd go further and suggest a rather muddy shade of brown!

The binary proposed by the parable does not accord with our lived experience as people who find ourselves sometimes feeding the poor and sometimes ignoring them; sometimes visiting those in prison and sometimes putting people in prison. The matter becomes even more complex when we consider that the parable applies not just to individuals and the choices they make, but also to whole communities and groups – is Australia for example a sheep or a goat on this basis? Our 'goat-like' record on incarceration of children, failure to welcome the poor and refugee, and catastrophic environmental destruction, just to begin, is probably not well offset by our seemingly 'sheep-like' corporate acts of aid and generosity, important though these are. It is highly complex.

There simply are no sheep who are not also goats. But that should not leave us hopeless. Nor should it deny our human instinct that in the economy of God, somehow as Billy Bragg expressed it, *'there will be a reckoning for the peddlers of hate.'* Judgment in that sense is an important theological idea that helps us distinguish the things that actually matter – feeding the hungry, giving a drink to the thirsty, visiting those who are sick or in prison, reaching out to the most vulnerable – from the things that don't matter or are actively harmful. And hopefully many of us here manage to do some of those helpful things at least some of the time. When we do, we experience a sense of inner rightness that brings us great joy.

Some of us were reflecting on this passage the other night and on time spent supporting refugee families, and how those times were precious precisely because of this inherent sense of rightness and of sharing in acts that were just and kind. When we do this, we participate in what Ilia Delio refers to as *'whole making'* – uniting what is scattered and creating a deeper unity in love. Challenging passages like today's parable thus rightly express God's call to see Christ in the outcast, to act justly and be assured of ultimate reckoning.

Yet this is always only part of God's ultimate work of reconciliation. As Ilia Delio puts it:

In Jesus, God breaks through and points us in a new direction; not one of chance or blindness but one of ever-deepening wholeness in love. In Jesus, God comes to us from the future to be our future. Those who follow Jesus are to become wholemakers, uniting what is scattered, creating a deeper unity in love.¹

To understand this melodramatic parable more fully, is to recognise that it is not prescriptive – it is not attempting to describe what God might do now or at some future time. Rather it is descriptive of the general muddle in which we find ourselves and of the whole-making that is needed for things to be better, always recognising that it is only by the grace and gift of God that any of us manage to offer even a cup of clean water to another. It holds up a mirror to how we act and suggests that there are better ways – ways that do not involve us projecting our own sense of shame and inadequacy and hurt onto others; ways that are founded upon the three Rs of inclusion: Recognition, Respect, and Relationality. Only when we recognise that we are all fundamentally the same 'stuff' and that we are all equally held and capable of holding the love of God, do we begin to relate authentically in ways that are life-giving.

¹ <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/whole-making-2016-11-21/>

We are surrounded here at Pitt St at the moment by bowls of many shapes, sizes and colours. Each represents a day in which Mary and Elizabeth visited with each other and talked and spent time – a day when differences of understanding were aired, and commonalities discovered. No doubt some days were easy, and some days were hard. Some days the sheep were grazing peacefully and others the goats butted heads. But every day, life was held and nurtured in the wombs of those two women. Every day the two of them were held together in the love and purpose of God. Every day there was a new light, a fresh nuance, a deeper understanding.

We too are like bowls - some more shapely or wholesome than others - but we belong together. And recognising that leads us to respect and relationality. Some of the bowls around us have little cracks. In some the blend of colours is pleasing – others invite more pondering to reveal their true beauty – but everything belongs, the red, the green, the streaky; the generous, the greedy; the kind and the unkind; the lost and forgotten parts of ourselves we have never forgiven and project onto others – everything is part of God's making and holding.

And it is truly beautiful to realise that we are never going to fall out of that greater bowl that is God's love for us. And as Richard Rohr says, *'if God can receive me, who am I not to receive myself?'*

For we can of course, make this story a fundamentalist, or a woke or a cancel culture parable - and make our own list of the excluded (JK Rowling, Donald Trump et al) but maybe this story is not about fighting 'deplorables' as Hillary Clinton once expressed it, but about living together with all that is, in the spirit of God? For as Richard Rohr points out in another place, *'when we can see the image of God where we don't want to see the image of God, then we see with eyes not our own'*.

Let me conclude by returning to my bowl and an invitation to prayer. This, of course, is my bowl, but to enter more deeply into God's love, you also might like to take one of your own when you get home. It does not have to be particularly special. It might simply be something like a breakfast bowl. You could however intentionally find or choose a bowl as a prayer bowl. Take it out when you are troubled by the state of the world, or by yourself, or when you want to give thanks, and hold it. For now, you may like just to make a bowl by cupping your hands together.

Firstly, let yourself know that you similarly held in God's love, just as you are, with all that you hold, or do not hold, within you. You are loved just as you are.

Then, secondly, hold that bowl as if you are holding yourself, and know that, as you are loved by God, so you too have the power to love yourself, just as you are, with all your strengths and failings, as a sheep and as a goat.

And then, thirdly, in the Spirit of that love which holds you and which you too can share, take time to hold that bowl as if you are holding those people, places, and other things, which are also divided, or distressed: sheep and goats.

Let the love by which you are held, and which flows in you, flow out to those people, places, and other things, which are divided and distressed, like sheep and goats.

May that love bring justice and mercy, and may you, and I, and all of creation, find wholeness and make whole. In the name of our whole making God, Amen.