

Nations that Flourish and Nations that Collapse

A sermon on Matthew 25:31-46 by Nathan Nettleton, 26 November 2023

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Message

Jesus calls us to a new world in which the lives of nations revolve around bringing the previously marginalised to the centre of our national way of being. Nations that fail to do that collapse into self-destruction.

Sermon

The story we heard Jesus tell in tonight's gospel reading – a story commonly called the dividing of the sheep and the goats, or sometimes the Final Judgement – is very well known, very important, and very widely misunderstood.

In Matthew's gospel, this story is placed as the climax of Jesus's itinerant teaching ministry, the very final piece of his teaching before we move into the detailed account of the week leading up to and including his execution. Not only is it the final piece of teaching, but it echoes some of the themes of the Beatitudes that first introduced us to Jesus's teachings back near the beginning of the gospel. Blessed are the poor, and now the nations are being judged by their care of the poor, etc. So we know this story is important because it is carefully placed and told as the final summing up of Jesus's teaching ministry.

This story is widely misunderstood for at least two main reasons. Firstly, we tend to hear it as though Jesus was telling everybody something they didn't know; as though he were saying, "Listen everybody, this is what the final judgement at the end of the world is going to be like, so you'd better all repent and behave accordingly."

The problem with that assumption is that it would be a bit like Jesus turning up today and saying, "Listen everybody, climate change and wars are getting out of control and threatening to wipe out the planet, so you'd better all repent and sort them out." That wouldn't be telling us anything we didn't already know. We'd only be listening to see if he had anything new to add, any new suggestions for what to do about it.

People in Jesus's day were mostly well informed about the end of the world and the final judgement, so they too wouldn't have been paying much attention to the general outline of Jesus's description. They would have been listening to see whether he told it differently from what they were used to, whether he broke with the conventional version. So this is another one of those stories that we easily misunderstand if we take too much notice of the main flow of the story Jesus adopts, instead of looking for how he twists it. When Jesus takes a story everyone already knows and twists it, it is his twists that are now the main point. More of that soon.

The second reason that this story is widely misunderstood is that most Christians believe that there will be a final judgement of each and every one of us, and we mistakenly think that this story is about that. It's not. This story quite clearly says that it is a judgement of the nations, not of individual people.

Unfortunately, many of our English translations have contributed to this problem. The original says something like, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, all the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate *them* one from another as a shepherd separates the

sheep from the goats.” But many of our English translations have replaced “them” with “people” so that it says, “all the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate *people* one from another.” It seems that even the translators have confused this story with the judgement of all people. What it actually says is that he will separate the nations one from another.

So this is not a story about how Shelley and Gilbert and Samara are going to be judged on the last day. It is a story about how Australia and the USA and Russia and Israel are being judged. That doesn't neutralise it at all. You know how you feel if some American or Brit turns up and starts making negative judgements about Australia. We still take it pretty personally. And given what's happening in Gaza, I don't have to remind you how most Israelis react if you level some criticism at Israel. You may have even heard some patriotic people say things like, “You can criticise me all you like, but criticise my country and you'd better be ready for a fight.” So the thrust of Jesus's teaching affects us deeply, but without being about us individually.

In fact, when many of us evangelicals have failed to notice this and thought that this story was about the judgement of all people, we've ended up in a right pickle. Because, as you've probably noticed, it doesn't say anything at all about believing in Jesus and putting your faith in his gracious forgiveness. In fact, taken as a judgement of people, the story would seem to be saying that we are saved by our works of charity, which is precisely what we evangelical protestants have said is definitely not the case.

The need to distinguish between a judgement of individuals and a judgement of the nations was probably less of a factor with the original audience in Jesus's day because they were less individualistic in their thinking anyway, and because they thought that both individuals and nations were going to be judged on the same basis – faithfulness to God expressed in obedience to the law of Moses.

Which brings us back to the first issue about our need to listen for how Jesus tweaks the story. In the time and place where Jesus was teaching, the expected version of the story would have gone something like this:

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I gave you my law which set before you a choice between the ways of righteousness and life and the ways of sin and death, and you have faithfully chosen righteousness, obeying my laws and keeping my covenant.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, because I put before you that choice, but you chose sin and wickedness and you spurned my covenant.’

But that's not the story that Jesus tells at all. He has taken a familiar scene, and twisted its usual message. He is subverting the usual expectations.

‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’

Not only was this not what was expected, but it completely subverted the conventional wisdom. When the law of Moses said “I put before you righteousness and life or sin and death; therefore choose life,” it went on to say that if the nation chose righteousness, they would be blessed and things would go well for them, but if they chose sin and wickedness, their crops would fail and pandemics would break out and their enemies would invade their land. So it was, and often still is, common to interpret that to mean that being poor and hungry and sick and outcast was evidence of your sin and wickedness and that you therefore self-evidently did not deserve anyone’s pity or charity. And who among us has never had a thought like that when approached by a drug-addled beggar in the street?

But Jesus turns all that on its head and says that the nations are judged for how they care or don’t care for the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the unclothed and unhoused, the sick, and the prisoners. And just in case anyone is dozing off, he repeats that list four times in the story, which is a storyteller’s way of saying this is very, very, very, very important. Don’t miss it, and I’ll just repeat it again to make sure you’ve got it.

When Jesus does this, it doesn’t just change the judgement, it reinterprets those ideas about the consequences of the paths we choose too. He is saying that nations will flourish if they give their energy and attention to providing for the most needy, but that nations who are happy to perpetuate the suffering of the poor in the pursuit of wealth and power are sowing the seeds of their own destruction.

Contrast this with how nations are usually judged in our world. Usually we measure their GDP, their per-capita income, the strength of their currency, the might of their military, and the influence they have over global affairs. Those we put at the centre of attention are the wealthy, the powerful, the influential, the successful. But Jesus says that he judges the nations by whether they put at the centre of their attention the hungry, the homeless, the sick and disabled, the asylum seekers, the voiceless, and the imprisoned.

Jesus is not much impressed by how much a country manages to build up the value of the real estate holdings of its home owners, but he does look very carefully at how much attention they give to the needs of the homeless and to providing accessible affordable housing for all. Jesus is not much impressed by how big a voice a nation’s political leaders have in the global forums, but he does look carefully at whether it gives a voice to its dispossessed indigenous people. Jesus is not much impressed by the effectiveness of a nation’s military in neutralising all threats and expanding its territory and influence, but he does look carefully at whether it is welcoming refugees and asylum seekers or creating more of them for the rest of the world to deal with.

If you think this all sounds a bit political, it is, and it’s going to get more so. Today is “Christ the King” Sunday, and kingship is inescapably political. Jesus was executed precisely because Herod and Pilate recognised that however much Jesus was redefining the nature of kingship, his refusal to outright renounce the title of King was a political threat. He might not be aiming to replace them as the rulers of their realm, but he was calling people to a new allegiance that would render their realms irrelevant and cast a harsh light of judgement on the results of their rule.

And this judgement of the nations that Jesus speaks about is not just some off-in-the-future, second coming kind of reality. It starts here and now. How come? Well this story starts with

Jesus identifying “the Son of Man” as the coming king who will sit in judgement of the nations, but just after this story we are told that under interrogation by Caiaphas the high priest, Jesus says, “From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” When will Jesus be sitting at the right hand of God on the throne of his glory judging the nations? From now on. From the day of his execution on.

Right now, Jesus is judging our nation and all nations on measures like whether or not we give a voice to the voiceless, or whether we make basic housing unaffordable by privileging the investment growth of existing property owners, or whether we properly fund and resource the NDIS, or whether we scapegoat trans kids for political popularity, or whether we turn a blind eye when our allies mercilessly bomb the crap out of defenceless civilians.

The consequences of this judgement are not some off-in-the-future reality either. As had been the case in the teachings of Moses, the fruits of judgement for the nations are blessings and curses in the here and now. Nations that prioritise the needs of the disadvantaged will be blessed and flourish as their national life is enriched and positive fruits grow from the increased justice, equality, and mutuality they have sown.

And for the nations that have neglected or even abused the poor? Well, here again we need to pause for a second and make sure we don’t fall into easy misunderstandings. When Jesus the king says to them, “depart from me into the age of fire prepared by the devil and his angels”, we have been conditioned to hear that as a reference to hell, understood as an other-worldly place of eternal punishment. But that’s probably wrong here. Remember we are talking about nations here, not individual people, so what would eternal supernatural punishment of a nation even mean?

And even more importantly, remember that this idea of an age of fire prepared by the devil and his angels is not one of Jesus’s tweaks, it is one of the conventional bits of the story he has borrowed to riff off. So Jesus is not telling this story to describe a future punishment that people wouldn’t have otherwise known about. He’s just using a story and a description that his hearers already know well, and the only bits anyone would have taken any notice of were the unexpected changes. Nobody went home that day and said, “You’d never believe what Jesus said eternal punishment looks like.” They’d have all gone home saying, “Can you believe that Jesus said that the way a nation treats its poorest and most vulnerable people is something God takes personally and that it’s what the nations are judged on?”

So when you note that, and also remember that this punishment is a now reality, not some future event, then nations being swallowed up in an age of fire lit by the devil and his angels is more a description, an obvious observable reality. Nations and empires rise and fall, and when they fall, it is usually with fiery self-destruction and bloodshed. They reap what they sow.

Look again at the pictures of the January 6 coup attempt in the USA, or their latest mass shooting, and ask yourself whether that doesn’t look like a cowboy nation reaping what it has sown and being swallowed up in an age of fire lit by the devil and his angels.

Consider again the atrocities committed in Israel last month by the brutal Hamas terrorists. Nothing can excuse their actions, but we are fools if we don’t seek to understand why Hamas can so easily find so many angry young Palestinian men who are filled with hate over the way

Israel has made their lives and the lives of their families not worth living. And surely the Israeli response, which has already killed ten times as many Palestinian civilians as Hamas killed in Israel, is simply sowing the seeds that will reap an even greater harvest of hatred in the next generation. Doesn't that too look like a nation being swallowed up in an age of fire lit by the devil and his angels?

And here in Australia, where as a nation we have dispossessed the indigenous peoples of their lands, their languages, their culture, and their children, denied them access to their food and water sources, afflicted them with diseases they had no immunity to, massacred them when they found themselves strangers and tried to return to their stolen lands, and even now imprisoned them at a higher rate than any other people on earth – what sort of age of fire have we kindled beneath our own feet?

How is our nation going to fare when King Jesus calls to us from his throne and says, “You left me hungry and thirsty and landless and homeless and naked and sick and a stranger and imprisoned, and even then I reached out a hand of reconciliation to you and simply asked for a voice in the future of the nation, and you turned your backs and said NO”? If we don't want our nation to be swallowed up in an age of fire, we'd better repent fast and stop playing with the devil's matches.

My friends, this story of Jesus reigning as king and judging the nations is not about you or me as individuals. But it is about the nation that we are a part of, and ultimately the fate of the nation is in the hands of its people, and that includes you and me. Jesus calls us to be a nation that sows seeds of future health and life by focussing our national strategies and energies on those who have most often been neglected or pushed aside, and doing all we can to bring them to the centre of our concerns and investing in their health, opportunity and wellbeing.

Because when Jesus reigns as king, that's what our world will look like. And Jesus is reigning as king now, so if we would name him as our king, that's what we will be striving for in our nation and indeed in our world. Come, King Jesus, Come. Come and lead us into a life, a faith, and a politics that leaves no one behind and leaves no one hurting and so causes the angry self-destructive fires to die down and flicker out and causes a healthy new tree of life and love and reconciliation and hope to grow and mature and bear fruit to the glory of God and the benefit of all.