

Have you ever thought about the way that our lives are just one big risk assessment? Now, that isn't just because I can't ask my youth kids to eat chips or walk outside without completing a risk assessment, but because in virtually every decision we make we are assessing potential outcomes, deciding on their likelihood and severity, and then working out what to do about it. It is as if our brains are just one overly developed risk assessment radar. And I've also noticed that many people have radars that are, in my opinion, malfunctioning. For example, it seems that many people are putting their lives on hold, willing to risk time, money and a beating, to ensure they have enough toilet paper for several years to come. And yet, while it now seems that running out of toilet paper at home is actually relatively likely, the severity isn't all that high. I mean if the worst possible outcome should happen, then all it would mean is that rather than having your morning poop after your morning shower, you have your morning poop first.

And by comparison, it seems that the general consensus is that it isn't worth bothering to work out what you believe about God, your purpose or what life after death could mean. People are happy to drive to four different supermarkets at 8am before work for toilet paper supplies, but they couldn't be stuffed to read a single book on religion. And this is done knowing that the former might mean a few weeks of inconvenience, while the latter has dramatic implications for eternity! Our toilet paper craze shows that if we are talking about personal quality of life, we certainly aren't lazy. And if our general lack of interest in critically investigating faith is not a matter of laziness, then I think to a large degree that it can be attributed to the belief that "it will all be OK in the end". Whatever happens, whatever I think, whatever I do, whatever I believe, it will all be OK in the end, so I don't need to worry. Unfortunately, though, Jesus never said "it will all be OK in the end". In fact, if anything, he gives us very dire warnings to the contrary, warnings of impending doom, of fire, brimstone and the gnashing of teeth. Now, I don't know about you, but this makes me wonder how we reconcile something so horrible as hell, with a God who is supposedly so loving, and I wonder, not just what this means for me, but also what it means for the many people I love who aren't walking with God.

Our passage for today, as is generally the case, doesn't stand in isolation. In fact, our passage is the climax of three parables that each teach of Jesus' eventual return. At the end of chapter 24 we have a parable about two kinds of servants, the first who cares for the household when the master is away, the second who goes out with drunkards. At the start of chapter 25 we have what we call the parable of the ten virgins, where ten unmarried women await their husbands. Some come prepared with the oil to keep their lamps lit, some don't. Then in the middle of 25 there is the parable of the talents which sees two servants entrusted with wealth being productive, while a third only buries what he is given. So we find ourselves in a section of Scripture where we are being told in no uncertain terms that Jesus is coming back, and that he expects us to be responsible, to be ready and to be productive. Today's passage drives this home in a climactic conclusion that rounds the section out by saying that we will be held to account for it all.

The scene is set in verse 31, with throne, judge and jury in their place, Jesus, the Son of Man is presiding with angels to witness. Here the language is reminiscent of Daniel 7 where we first see the title Son of Man given to the one who God gives all authority, the one to whom all nations worship. While in Daniel 7, those of all nations, peoples and languages worship him, here in Matthew we see all the nations described as sheep and goats before him. He separates them, putting the sheep in the position of power and honour on his right, and the goats to his left.

Now of course, this is a bit of a strange metaphor to us. I mean, I certainly haven't separated out any sheep or goats lately, but who knows what people in Swansea get up to. Supposedly separating sheep from goats would have been pretty common practice in Jesus' day. Sheep and goats fare differently in the cold and so would typically be separated out at night. Its likely that this image was as common to them as say, separating out the knives and the forks in the cutlery tray is to us. Knives and forks might be used together, but only a monster would have them mixed up in the draw.

Jesus, the Son of Man and king, then gives judgement, equal and opposite to each group, for equal and opposite reasons. The sheep are invited into the presence of Jesus, they are blessed and receive God's kingdom as their inheritance. They enter what we call heaven. The goats are told to depart from Jesus' presence, they are cursed and forced into the eternal fire that is the kingdom of the devil. They enter what we call hell.

Talking about what it could mean to be in heaven or hell, in some ways, is as futile as it is interesting. The range of descriptions we are given are symbolic. From gold streets (Rev 21:21) to a perfect cube (Rev 21:16), from a lake of sulphur (Rev 21:8) to a hot furnace (Matt 13:50), we are given all kinds of descriptions which basically mean that heaven is really really really good, and that hell is really really really bad. But it still leaves us with the question: if God loves us enough to die for us, why would he judge us in such a way? We don't have all the answers, but the text doesn't leave us empty handed. What governs both "heaven" and "hell" in this passage, what is the primary determinant as to which you are in, is whether you are coming closer to Jesus, or whether you are leaving his presence. This is the key upon which any understanding of heaven or hell must hang. Rather than thinking of heaven and hell as locations we are sent to, we should be thinking of them as the outworking of our relationship with God, as the result of being with, or being absent from his presence.

I think this is why we can say with confidence, and I really do hope you are confident about this, that we don't have a God that tortures people for eternity, rather, we have a God who allows people to choose to be with him or to not, we have a God that honestly seeks to inform us as to the severity of the choice. If you hated shadows, you wouldn't get angry at the sun because to be without it would mean nothing but shadow. In the same way, God's existence isn't the threat of hell, it's the glorious opportunity of heaven.

But now, our knives and forks, our sheep and goats are not just given opposite judgements, but their judgement stems from opposite action. But it isn't what we might expect, it certainly isn't what sheep and goats expected.

Jesus says he is bringing the sheep near to him because they gave him food, drink, hospitality, clothes, care and companionship. The sheep are like "what? We did?" and Jesus says, "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me". Of course, the opposite is true for the goats.

When we first read this we assume that "brothers and sisters" just means every human being, which makes this passage becomes a really powerful metaphor for caring for others. However, I think this way of reading the passage is actually completely wrong, and it is the result of our culture trying to convince itself that "it will all be OK in the end, as long as I'm nice to others." Does Jesus want us to care for everyone? Yes! Is that what gets us into heaven, no!

Complicating the issue here though is that the NIV says brothers and sisters. The Greek only uses the one word "brothers", although the NIV are right in adding "sisters" because "brothers" for someone in the ancient near east is like me calling everyone here "guys". It refers to both genders. Yet, when we know it technically just says brothers, Matthew is pretty clear about who he means when he says brothers (12:48-49; 23:8; 28:10). In each of these three passages, Jesus uses the word brothers to refer to his disciples. Jesus isn't saying that the sheep get to come to him because they cared for just anyone, Jesus is saying that they get to come to him because they aided his disciples. Jesus is saying they get to come to him because they aided his disciples, as the disciples were on their mission to spread the word. And in doing so, in receiving the disciples and aiding them, they themselves were responding to God's message, so in receiving the disciples they choose to become disciples. This passage is about receiving the gospel of God's grace willingly and with action, not about deserving heaven because you are a decent person.

And here in lies our knock your socks off challenge. This text makes the assumption that disciples of Jesus are going to be in need of food, of drink, of someone to give them a bed, of clothing to wear. It assumes that the disciples will be sick and imprisoned. And it assumes this because that is what happens when you answer Jesus' call to mission. It assumes that a disciple will go places at such personal cost that there will be times when they don't know where their food and water will come from. It assumes that they will go places such that they won't have a house of their own to stay in. It assumes that they will experience the illnesses of foreign places. It assumes that it will be common that disciples find themselves on the wrong side of the law and in prison. The text assumes sacrificial suffering as the disciples do what they are called to do. Now tell me. How often have you had to worry about what you will eat or drink, where you will stay, what you will wear, how often have you had to worry about imprisonment or illness on your mission as a disciple?

I think we have accidently convinced ourselves that modern life, that living in Australia with religious tolerance means that disciples of Jesus can live normal lives. I'm sorry, we're

wrong. It might not look like walking from door to door to see who will listen to us and feed us, but it does often mean sacrificing savings, super, holidays, full time work, our dream job, our dream house on the beach because instead we are budgeting our time and money and lifestyle to the extent that we have to trust in God because if something goes wrong we will need his help to get all the stuff we need. It means willing to take risks, calculated risks, but risks, because sharing the good news is more important than paying off a loan.

Please don't hear me say that there is a suffering checklist that you need to have completed for Jesus to love you. Not every disciple will experience all of these things, however, it is expected that the life of the disciple will be so radical as to make these things common challenges. I think we should be seriously rethinking a few of the life patterns that we have copied from secular society. Are my savings and super plans best for kingdom growth? Is working full time really best for kingdom growth? Are my holiday plans and expenses really best for kingdom growth? Is living here on the coast really best for kingdom growth? Is stockpiling toilet paper, rather than giving it away really best for kingdom growth? The fact that you are listening to me, not from your church building, is a sign that you have an unprecedented opportunity right now to be a witness to those around you. I don't say that toilet paper thing lightly. If you have a bunch of toilet paper, think about who you might be able to call to see if they need any? Over the coming weeks, who might be in need of a meal dropped at their house? Who might need to chat on the phone? Who might need to hear of the hope we have in Jesus? What I'd invite you to do is sit down with your family, with your connect group, your mentor, and pray through these questions, and to do so knowing that it may lead to a life where you are so dependent on God that you won't always know where you're staying or what you're eating, or how you're wiping your butt.

This is a big call on our lives. We need to know why we should bother. Why bother give up time and money and have to work so hard? Well the simplest answer for me is that there are people I love. There are people I love and it breaks me to see them live lives that are worse than they could be, and it would certainly break me to see them separated out as goats, to see them turn from God's presence. I'll give God everything I have to see him change that. Everything.

Knowing that there are lives on the line, I am not OK with spending 40 hours a week making my life stable and 4 hours a week trying to save my loved ones. Somewhere along the line we turned discipleship from life-changing identity, into two hour and a half meetings each week that we invite our friends to once a year, and where we put 10% of our money in a funny little bag. Are you ready and willing to make real sacrifices for those around you?

Of course, we know that as much as the life of a disciple is a life of sacrifice, we also know that it is only in giving up our lives that we truly find them (Matt 10:39). Jesus never said that "it will all be OK in the end", but Jesus did said "everyone who believes may have eternal life". Matthew 25 calls us to forget the toilet paper and to instead think towards eternity.