

# BIBLICAL RESOURCES



**Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17; Psalm 23 (22); 1 Cor 15:20-26, 28; Matthew 25:31-46**

## The Son of Man will sit on the throne of his glory

Matt 25:31 Jesus said: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34 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; 35 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, 36 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.’ 37 Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ 40 And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ 41 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; 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to



drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ 44 Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ 45 Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

### Thought for the day

“King” is a foundational metaphor in the Bible, which in ordinary usage suggests power and glory. But even in the ancient biblical tradition, there are two great modifications. According to an Old Testament vision, a king is meant to be a shepherd to his people, a true shepherd who cares for and who knows and even loves his sheep. According to a New Testament vision, Jesus our king rules paradoxically by loving service, humility and the gift of himself. This example and teaching of Jesus have lost none of their power.

### Prayer

Wake us up, O God, and rouse us from the slumber of the everyday that we may recognise you in every moment and in every person, each day of our lives. Amen.

### INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This parable, found only in Matthew, needs quite careful handling. As we saw recently, it belongs to a pattern of parables in this part of Matthew. (See box below. Mk = Mark; Q = the Sayings Source; M = Matthew’s special material).

### OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

In the Old Testament, a Day of the Lord is expected when he will intervene to punish the wicked and deliver that faithful and thus establish his own rule (Is 13:6, 9; 58:13; Jer 46:10; Ezek 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14; Amos 5:18, 20; Obad 1:15; Zeph 1:7, 14; Mal 4:5). Sometimes a shorter expression is used, but the meaning is the same (e.g., “on that day,” Zeph. 1:9-10; Amos 8:9; “the day of the Lord’s sacrifice,” Zeph. 1:8; “the day of the wrath of the Lord,” Ezek. 7:19; cf. Isa. 2:12).

### KIND OF WRITING

In form, rather than a parable, this is a didactic *tableau*. It lacks the enigmatic element of the original Jesus parables

#### Verses

24: 1-44

24: 45-25:30

25: 31-46

#### Contents

following Mk 13, + additions and changes

parables of delay (Steward, Virgins, Talents)

parable of the Last Judgement

#### Source

Mk/Q/M

Q/M/Q

M

- a) The fig tree as a parable of the coming of the Son of Man
- b) As in the days of Noah
- c) As when a burglar comes
- d) As with a faithful servant when his master returns
- e) As with bridesmaids awaiting the bridegroom
- f) As with talents given to servants to work with
- g) **As with sheep and goats separated by the shepherd**

and is more “teachy”, in the manner of Matthew. As the decoding shows, the parable is treated allegorically.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

There are two interpretations of this parable. The traditional interpretation, which probably cannot be set aside, is that anyone who is kind to someone in need will be judged favourably. This is the “universalist” interpretation. There is another, usually called the “particularist” interpretation. According to this view, what Matthew has in mind is the narrow question of what will happen to good non-believers who have come to the help of believers in distress. This perhaps surprising reading depends on a number of observations about Matthew’s vocabulary and theology. It can be laid out in the following steps.

Who is gathered for judgement? In Matthew’s text, “all the nations” never refers to Christians or even Christians and non-Christians together (see Matt 24:9, 14; 25:32; 28:19). There was a later Jewish tradition that there would be a separate judgement for non-believers (see *Testament of Benjamin* 10:8-9; *4 Ezra* 13:33-50; *1 Enoch* 90-91).

Who are the least of my brethren (“members of my family” in the NRSV)? First of all, “one of these little ones” always refers to disciples in Matthew (Matt 10:42; 18:6, 10, 14). The expression “least of my brethren” takes up the idea of “little” and adds the technical term for a member of the Christian community, *adelphoi*, meaning brothers and sisters. In Matthew’s Gospel, *adelphos* always means a literal family member or else a disciple.

In another passage, similar language seems to point to the service of the disciples by non-believers:

Jesus said: “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.” (Matt 10:40-42)

Bearing all this in mind, contrary to the traditional reading of this parable, the issue at stake here is not “how will anyone who is kind be saved” but rather

“what will happen to those non-believers who have come to the help of disciples”. The first question is really a modern one. The second question may reflect more accurately conditions in the first century. For example, no food was provided for people in prison as they awaited trial. Christians were imprisoned, as we know (1Cor 4:11-13; 2Cor 6:4-5; 11:25-27; 3Jn 5-7), they would have depended upon charitable non-believers to help them. The teaching of the parable, therefore, would seem to be this: Christians, in their vulnerability, enable non-believers to encounter Christ, because “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” There is a deep message for disciples today and the church: salvation is made available not by power or benevolence but by weakness and vulnerability. Such a teaching echoes the experience of St Paul, as we see in the next section.

ST PAUL

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.” So then, each of us will be accountable to God. (Romans 14:10-12)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Broadly speaking, the remarks made above set the ground for reading the parable, so that a very detailed comment is not necessary. This parable of the Last Judgment ends positively, with the just — judged favourably — on their way to heaven.

**Verses 31-33** The scene is set, with the traditional symbolism of the right and the left.

**Verses 34-36** A full description of the works of love is given.

**Verses 37-39** A shortened account is given.

**Verse 40** The particularist reading makes most sense at this point.

**Verse 41-43** A not quite so full description is given.

**Verse 44** The shortest account possible to speed up the telling.

**Verse 45** The same response as in v. 40, but this time in the negative.

**Verse 46** Judgment is then enacted, but the sequence is reversed: those going to eternal punishment are dealt with first so that the parable ends on a positive note of reward for good deeds.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

**1.** This judgment scene contains surprises for us. One is that nobody is condemned for doing wrong, but for their failure to do good. Jesus is telling us that being his disciple is a positive choice about how we live and relate to others. Perhaps sin-avoidance has sometimes dominated your view of what was being asked of you. What difference has it made for you when you viewed your Christian life as a daily opportunity to make a positive difference to others?

**2.** Another way of saying this is that the aim of Christian living is not me-centred (about my personal sanctification) but other centred (about responding to the needs of others). What happens to you when you get caught up yourself? Is your life not better, and often more enjoyable, when you can look beyond yourself to others?

**3.** The standard of love and concern that Jesus presents challenges us to look beyond our comfort zone to those who are most in need. Who are those most in need in your world? When have you been able to move beyond your comfort zone in reaching out to them?

**4.** Another surprise is to hear Jesus tell us that when we do something for another, he considers it as done to himself. When has seeing Christ in others helped you in your dealings with them?

**5.** The story is about the judgment of the whole of humanity. It presents an ideal of society in which human relationships at all levels are governed by the law of love. In your experience what difference has it made to a group to which you belonged when there was a definite sensitivity to the needs of all members?

PRAYER

Almighty God, you have conferred upon Christ Jesus sovereignty over every age and nation.

Direct us, in the love of Christ, to care for the least of his brothers and sisters, that we may be subject to his dominion and receive the inheritance of your kingdom.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

# But now Christ the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep

1 Cor 15:20 But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also came through a man. 22 For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ, the first-fruits; then when Christ comes, those who belong to him. 24 Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, when he has brought to an end all rule and all authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be eliminated is death. 27 *For he has put everything in subjection under his feet. But when it says "everything" has been put in subjection, it is clear that this does not include the one who put everything in subjection to him.* 28 And when all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will be subjected to the one who subjected everything to him, so that God may be all in all.

## INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The reading given is very suitable for feast day. Being the last Sunday of the liturgical year, it brings up the question of the end of time and hope in the resurrection of the dead.

## CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

Paul answers confronts lost of problems and answers many questions 1 Corinthians. One of these questions touches on the resurrection of the dead. Evidently, some in the community believed fully Christ but, at the same time, did not believe that the dead would rise in Christ. This ancient question has a contemporary resonance. Often in our faith community, while people pray etc., at the same time they find it hard to image the next "stage" after death. This is perfectly understandable. Paul tackles the question in two ways (see below). First of all, he spends time showing the illogicality of their position (vv. 12-24). Then, he goes on to open up their imagination in a powerful discussion of the body, showing that "body" can mean many things, including the "spiritual body."

## KIND OF WRITING

The whole of 1 Corinthians 15 is laid out in the form of a speech, following

the rhetorical conventions of the time.

1-2	Introduction
3-11	The agreed affirmations
12-34	Proof 1: illogicality
35-57	Proof 2: the resurrected "body"
58	Conclusion

Paul proceeds mostly by logic, a reasoning that any reasonable person could follow. At two key points, he abandons "Greek" logic for faith affirmations, using the language of Jewish apocalyptic. These two sections, vv. 20-28 and vv. 44-49 (Adam Christ comparisons), should be read in tandem (see below). Proof One involves the following steps:

Proof 1		
12	<b>Topic</b>	<i>Christ raised and no resurrection of the dead?</i>
13-19	<b>A</b>	<i>No resurrection at all = no risen Christ</i>
20-28	<b>B</b>	<b>Adam and Christ</b>
29-34	<b>A<sup>1</sup></b>	<i>No resurrection, what what's the point?</i>

## RELATED PASSAGES

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. So also it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living person"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. However, the spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man is from the earth, made of dust; the second man is from heaven. Like the one made of dust, so too are those made of dust, and like the one from heaven, so too those who are heavenly. And just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, let us also bear the image of the man of heaven. (1 Cor 15:44-49; cf. Rom 5:12-21)

## BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 20** The "but now" is very strong introducing a contrary affirmation. In 20b, Paul uses the term first-fruits, an image taken from farming, whereby the first cutting was offered to God as a sign that the whole harvest was God's. Notice the switch from "dead" to "sleep", suggesting a condition from which we will awaken (= to rise).

**Verse 21** In Apocalyptic, the beginning and the end resemble each other, a congruity suggesting a divine pattern or plan.

**Verse 22** The general principle of v. 21 is applied to the question of death. The congruity is not perfect: death in Adam, life in Christ, one negative, the other positive.

**Verse 23** Apocalyptic was interested in the sequence of the end. Paul uses that interest here to account for the fact that we still die and that the victory over death, already achieved, is not complete until the very end. Hence, people still died. Cf. 1 Thess 4:13-18.

**Verse 24** Only after the resurrection of the dead will the kingdom be finally established. The next verses expand on this claim.

**Verse 25** All his enemies = all the forces of evil and destruction, including death.

**Verse 26** Even though Christ himself is risen and victory is assured, death still exercises *apparent* power over life, as we all know.

**Verse 27** To subject may sound it. The nuance is to place in order, to subordinate and so to control. It is part of the language of the sequence of the end. This subordination does not, of course, include God.

**Verse 28** The repetition of subject/subordinate is strong: God, the Son, the world (all), in that order. The jubilant tone anticipates the later v. 57: *But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!* (1 Cor 15:57) In this way, the sequence of the end points to God's overall plan, not immediately apparent in our ordinary experience.

## POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. What has shaped my own faith in life after death? Where there significant moments of evolution in conviction?
2. Does my faith in Jesus' resurrection shape my hope for death in Christ?

## PRAYER

Living God, your desire is that we should be fully alive in Christ and free from all fear. Help us embrace our faith in such a way that it truly sets our hearts free to love and service without counting the cost. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

# I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out

Ezek 34:11 For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. 12 As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. 13 *I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land.* 14 *I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.* 15 I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. 16 I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

Ezek 34:17 As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats.

## INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

It is obvious from v. 17 why this passage was chosen to match Matthew 25:31-46. Given the long gospel, the lectionary omits vv. 13-14 for reasons of brevity; these are restored here for reflection purposes. In those days, the shepherd was pivotal in the life of the sheep: he found pasture, protected them, lived with them and so forth. The metaphor of shepherding was used throughout the Ancient Near East to speak of kingly rule, and then by extension, to speak of the rule of God. Just as a shepherd is “pivotal” for the well-being of sheep, likewise the king or even God is pivotal in the life of his people.

## ORIGIN OF THE READING

Ezekiel prophesied and wrote just before and then during the Babylonian Exile (587-539 bc). Along with other writers, he interprets the Exile as a punishment for infidelity. In particular, Ezekiel—himself a priest—lays the blame for the disaster at the feet of the priests. For that reason, all of ch. 34 is highly critical of the higher clergy. See, for example,

Ezekiel 34:1-10.

## KIND OF WRITING

The passage read in the liturgy is the second part of a prophecy of judgement. It is much more positive and, while it is prose rather than poetry, it exploits to the full and very movingly the metaphor of shepherding: search, seek (v. 11), scattered, rescue (v. 12); shepherd, lie down (v. 15); seek, lost, strayed, bind, injured, strengthen, weak, fat, strong (v. 16); sheep and goats (v. 17). The verses omitted in the lectionary are also rich: bring them out, gather, feed, watercourse (v. 13); feed, good pasture, lie down, grazing land, pasture (v.14).

## RELATED READINGS

There is the obvious background of the call of David, Psalm 23, Isaiah 40. But even in the book of Genesis we find this language:

He blessed Joseph, and said, “The God before whom my ancestors Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all harm, bless the boys; and in them let my name be perpetuated, and the name of my ancestors Abraham and Isaac; (Genesis 48:15-16)

Yet his bow remained taut, and his arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob, by the name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, by the God of your father, who will help you, by the Almighty who will bless you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lies beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb. (Genesis 49:24-25)

## BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 11** “I myself” is in conscious contrast with the priests, who have not been faithful shepherds. God steps in to look after his own.

**Verse 12** The day of clouds and thick darkness means the Day of the Lord, which they have experienced in the disaster of the Exile (see Deut 4:11; Joel 2:2; Zeph 1:15, Psalm 97:2).

**Verse 13** A beautiful pastoral description, exploiting fully the pastoral

metaphor. See 11:17: Therefore say: Thus says the Lord GOD: I will gather you from the peoples, and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel. (Ezekiel 11:17)

**Verse 14** The repetitions are for insistence: it is to reassure the exiles that God can and will do this for them.

**Verse 15** The emphatic “I myself” returns to close the pronouncement. The occurrence of the word “I” in this and the next verse is very noticeable.

**Verse 16** God’s real gift will be justice, that is, he will act rightly according to the covenant bond with Israel. It leads to the role of judgement to be found in the next verse. Destroying the fat and the strong seems odd at this point. It may be due to an error in the Hebrew and it is possible it should read, I will tend them rightly. Otherwise, it has to be taken to refer (awkwardly) to the fat clergy!!

**Verse 17** In this final verse in the lectionary, God addresses the flock directly. For them he will administer justice. The assessment in this case does not divide into sheep and goats (because these are equally valuable), but between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats.

## POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. It is God himself who seeks us out, however we are lost. Can I remember and pray over times in my life when I myself felt really lost and needed God’s guidance and help? Prayer of thanksgiving.
2. Reading the past can be illuminating. Sometimes things which seem excellent turn out to be fraught and something things which seem disastrous turn out to be grace. Have I found this in my own life? Prayer of discernment.
3. The care of God is especially evident in this passage. How have I experienced God’s love and care in my own life and in different settings?

## PRAYER

Loving shepherd of the sheep, show yourself once more as our true leader, a guide to us who often stray and are lost. Take us on your shoulder and lead us home rejoicing.

# THE LITURGY



## Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17; Psalm 23 (22); 1 Cor 15:20-26, 28; Matthew 25:31-46

### READINGS 1 AND 3

The Parable of the Last Judgment uses the language of shepherding and kingly rule, following biblical tradition. Specifically, the shepherding language is found in vv. 32-33. As noted already, it is the last verse of the reading which seems to link most closely with the judgment parable.

### THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 23 is in two parts. The first goes from vv. 1-4 (“Song of the Shepherd”) and the second from vv. 5-6 (“Song of Hospitality”). The imagery of shepherding is beautifully developed here and responds marvellously to the reading from Ezekiel, using much of the same language of pasture etc.

### SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

#### First reading

*Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17*

This very moving reading was written at a time of failure and calamity. The religious leadership had failed the people and so God speaks to them directly.

#### Second reading

*1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28*

When Paul wrote to the believers in Corinth, they really did believe Jesus was raised from the dead but they couldn't imagine a resurrection of the dead for themselves. Paul teaches that all who belong to him will be brought to life in Christ.

#### Gospel

*Matthew 25:31-46*

In the familiar parable of the Last Judgment, today's gospel tries to answer the question: where can the believer encounter Christ in our ordinary everyday life.

### WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

For the final week of the Church's year, we hear from the book of Daniel. The book as whole is a work of fiction representing Jewish piety of the second centu-

ry bc, in which Daniel is the perfect illustration of Torah steadfastness.

Part I (chapters 1-6, in the courts of Babylon and Persia) shows Daniel as man of wisdom, judgment and leadership. Part II (chapters 7-12) adds to his skills those of an apocalyptic visionary. Without simplifying too much, Part I shows Daniel the public man, engaged in affairs of state. Part II takes us to the inner Daniel and we learn of his ecstatic experiences and how they affected him. The book retains its significance for Christians on account of the vision of the Son of Man in chapter 7 and the teaching on the resurrection in chapter 12.

#### Monday 27 November

*St Fergus, bishop and missionary*

*Daniel 1:1-6, 8-20*

The book of Daniel is a book of protest, written in symbol or code. On the surface, it is about the time of Nebuchadnezzar, but in reality it is about the Syrian tyrant and persecutor, Antiochus IV Epiphanes. As in the time of Antiochus, the food laws were a test.

*Luke 21:1-4*

In an abbreviated version of a familiar story, Luke takes us to the heart of the matter of giving *from within*.

#### Tuesday 28 November

*Daniel 2:31-45*

Daniel is shown to be an interpreter of dreams. The real message is that seemingly all-powerful and ever-lasting systems of oppression come crashing down, without exception.

*Luke 21:5-11*

It is easy to misread the sign of the times and so Jesus warns his followers—and us—not to be deceived, especially by those making extravagant spiritual claims.

#### Wednesday 29 November

*Daniel 5:1-6, 13-14, 16-17, 23-28*

Our expression “the writing on the wall” comes from this very famous story—a highly theatrical tale. The king is punished for robbing the Temple and Daniel interprets for him the fearful writing on

the wall: you too will come crashing down!!

*Luke 21:12-19*

Our Gospel paints a picture of great distress and yet, in the last two sentences, provides the very message of hope we so badly need in our time.

#### Thursday 30 November

*St Andrew, apostle*

*Romans 10:9-18*

Paul is convinced that the Word of God is very near to us, “in our hearts and on our lips.” We need, nevertheless, bearers of that Word, more than ever...perhaps I could be a carrier myself?

*Matthew 4:18-22*

As usual in the call stories, things that would interest us—how did their wives and children feel?—are left out and we stand before the sovereign call of Jesus. Have I heard that call in my own life?

#### Friday 1 December

*Daniel 7:2-14*

Where did Jesus get the expression Son of Man from? In part from this very vision in the book of Daniel. Heavenly judgment is in progress and the mediator between God and humans is precisely “one like a son of man.”

*Luke 21:29-33*

Reading the signs of the times is the task of us all, that we may know the kingdom of God among us. It is not always easy...

#### Saturday 2 December

*Daniel 7:15-27*

The message—in coded language—is the present seemingly everlasting oppression will come to a crashing end.

*Luke 21:34-36*

The final warning of the liturgical year is one of watchfulness. It would be easy to settle for a sentient existence, sleep-walking through life and satiating ourselves with distractions. We are called to greater awareness—and life!—than that. Amen.