Petrikirche Kleefeld **15th November 2009**

The Sheep and the Goats

I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me. (Matt 25.45)

The text laid down for this morning's sermon is the story that we have heard for the Gospel reading, and to focus our thoughts I have just quoted a key verse from the end of the parable, but we must start with a famous verse from the beginning: "He will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left." These verses have been an incredibly fertile theme for Christian art, and you can see depictions in paint and in stained glass and in carvings, both in churches and in art galleries. One of the favourite places for them was as a piece of sculpture above one of the principal doors of a church or cathedral: that was partly because the theme particularly fits a space like that under a Gothic arch, which is narrow at the top and widens out below, but it was also because it was a theme which had a particular message for those who were going to worship.

More of that in a moment, but first of all, what do we see in these scenes? Christ is usually at the top, on the judgement seat, surrounded by angels and saints; St Michael may well be there, holding scales to weigh the souls of men and women at the Last Judgement, and an angel will be blowing the Last Trumpet: below in the middle you will see the naked figures of men and women coming out of their graves. On our right, as we stand looking at it, you will probably see some great jaws open – they are the jaws of hell, and angels or demons are pushing the wicked into them: you can see vivid scenes of the torment of the lost souls, and the artist will have included bishops and kings, perhaps even a pope, to make the point that all are subject to the same judgement. Our right is, of course, Christ's left, so they are the goats in the shepherd's separation of the flock as described in the verses that I quoted a few moments ago. To those on his left the king says, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' In contrast, the King says to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.' And so we see those on that side of the scene being shepherded away by angels to eternal bliss.

In the middle ages these descriptions of bliss and torment were taken very literally, so that fear of hell became a major motivating factor in people's lives as Christians. I don't think that this was the original intention behind Jesus's parable: certainly today only a minority of modern Christians will respond in that literal kind of way, so how should we understand this parable? I have said that the traditional place for this scene is above the entrance to a church, because it is meant to challenges us to think hard about what our faith really means in daily life: it says to us, "OK, as a Christian you can talk the talk, but can you walk the walk?" Or to put it in biblical language, it reminds us of the famous verse from the Epistle of St James, "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves." What commitment do ***we*** have to showing the love of Christ to those in need?

I recently heard of a moving example of people who rose to the challenge of this parable: on St Martin's Day, which fell last week, a Bavarian colleague was prompted to tell me of what happened on St Martin's Day 20 years ago, as the communist regime in the German Democratic Republic began to fall apart. In those days he had a parish near the Czech border, and their village suddenly had a large number of East Germans, who had taken

refuge in the West German Embassy in Prague, and who had then been allowed to travel to the West. These people were being housed in school halls and church halls in very unsatisfactory circumstances. The children in the Bavarian village Kindergarten put on their usual play, telling the story of the saint cutting his cloak in two to give a beggar half of it, so to help him keep warm. The pastor was prompted to tell the congregation that the contemporary equivalent of St Martin giving half of his cloak to the beggar would be for them to share their homes with the refugees in their own village, and he was very moved by the positive response that he got. That, of course, not only fits the St Martin story, it also exactly fits one of the sentences in the parable of the sheep and the goats, "I was a stranger and you took me in."

The shock of the recent financial melt-down, and the continuing consequences that it has for almost everyone, are prompting a lot of questions about values in our society – what really matters in a nation's life, and does the quality of life in our society inspire us with confidence for the future? There is a new debate about what is fair or just. Does this parable have anything to say to that? I think that it does – it poses a very sharp question about social justice, and whose responsibility it is.

The philosopher Friedrich Hayek famously said thirty or more years ago, "Social Justice is a quasi-religious superstition which we must fight against... The prevailing belief in social justice is currently the greatest threat to most of the other values of a free civilisation." By "free" he meant above all the freedom of the individual and the freedom of the market. This emphasis on individual choice, and the faith in an unfettered market, have produced a society in which people have felt that satisfying their own individual wants must take priority over everything else. It was under the influence of this sort of political and economic theory that Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in England and Ronald Reagan as President of the United States developed their ideas of decreasing regulation and lowering the level of taxes to give more freedom to individuals to make their own choices. One of the phrases that will always be associated with Mrs Thatcher is "There is no such thing as society." It is something which the historians are quite clear that she never actually said, but it just seems to sum up so well the view which rates individual freedom more highly that building a more just society, so she will probably never shake off that reputation. From our point of view in this reflection on today's reading that memorable remark gives dramatic focus to the fact that over the last thirty years our sense of responsibility for each other has been seriously weakened.

Deregulated industries can choose to give less protection to employees' rights, and they can choose to do less to protect the environment and guard against pollution or climate change. Individuals who have unfettered freedom to make their own choices can opt for greed or short-term gain, rather than for what is best for the majority in the long run. Both the greed and the pursuit of short-term advantage have helped to make the current crisis so serious.

In the early 1980's a rich financier said in a lecture at the University of Berkeley, California, "I think greed is healthy. You can be greedy and still feel good about yourself." That idea was put even more brutally in a movie about Wall Street that was made soon afterwards, where a tough tycoon declares, "Greed is good," the idea being that if people are free to make as much money as they like, they will be motivated to make things happen in the economy, but of course the question is, "At what human cost?". The real life financier went to jail for insider trading within a year or two of that lecture, so he may then have changed his mind about being greedy and still feeling good about yourself, but the fictional character's statement "Greed is good" was not to be got rid of so easily, and its influence has been felt

until the present crisis – I have heard it quoted without disapproval. Now, however, in our changed world, it seems very offensive and we shall shall hear much less of it!

There was a vivid message for us here in last week's celebrations in Berlin of the fall of the Wall. Did you see those dominoes go down – symbolising the way that one act to free people from oppression can trigger another, and so on. It was very dramatic, and very moving. But you can have a vicious version of the same mechanism, where one act of selfishness or greed triggers another, because people are tempted to say, "If they he or she is doing it, why shouldn't I?" That is how greed and lack of concern for others can take hold of a society without anyone making a positive decision to change things, but simply because there has been a loss of commitment to the values that have held a society together.

WB Yeats, the Irish poet, gave a chilling description of such a time in a poem ("The Second Coming", 1919) which he wrote after the terrible turmoil of the First World War, and at a time when Ireland was threatened with a spiral of violence and hatred:

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...
>
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.

In our present time of crisis we do not have to respond to physical violence, but we are dealing with the destruction of the values that have held our society together. The market alone will not put that right – to borrow a phrase from Oscar Wild, it is driven by those who know the price of everything and the value of nothing! Our society needs a clear voice to speak up for the vulnerable and the marginalised, and we need to rediscover a commitment to the common good. Christians do not have a monopoly of these things, but in a society traumatised by the recent financial turmoil, the message of this parable to the church and to individual Christians is that as well as responding to individual need in the way described in the story, we must also be passionate advocates of a more humane society, and one where the good of all must take priority over the freedom of the individual.

My text was "Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me." That is our Christian motivation for building a more just and humane society, and we must not only work for a fairer society with those who share our faith in Christ, but we must also find arguments which will persuade those of all faiths and none to do the same. Inspired by this parable we can help to change the climate of public opinion, so that making money is seen as less important than what people actually do with it when they have got it! A healthy society is one which really knows what matters most, and which then puts its resources in to helping men and women to flourish in body and soul. "Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."