



## An Ecological Reading of Matthew 25:31-46

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT points to the ecological impact of the parable of the goats and sheep in Matthew 25:31-46 as calling us to care for our common home.

**A**s the Year of Matthew in the Sunday Lectionary draws to a close (26 November 2017), the Church celebrates the feast of the Universal or the Cosmic Christ. The Gospel of Matthew offers an extraordinarily appropriate reading for this celebration in the last great parable Mt 25:31-46.

*Matthew 25:31* "When the Human One comes in glory, with all the angels,

*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 ..., 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: '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 Human One 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.'"* (NRSV)

Jesus the Teacher and Parabler concludes the fifth and last of the great discourses that constitute the Matthean gospel story with what we might call an end-time parable which makes use of cosmic imagery. The parable is replete with ethics, the right ordering of relationships within the human and other-than-human community. There is an identification and a separation of the ethical and the unethical or the righteous and unrighteous (Mt 25: 45-46), imaged as sheep and goats (Mt 25:32 – note here the care we need to take with such imaging, especially in its possible caricaturing of animals).

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## Meeting the Needs of Others

This time of final separation is projected as “the end” when the Human One/Jesus comes “in his glory”. Of all the future imaginings contained in eschatological discourse (Mt 24-25), this one demonstrates most strongly that those imaginings are intended to circle back into the ethical now. Those who address the essential material needs of others are called blessed because they give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome to the stranger, clothing to the naked, care for the sick and visit the imprisoned. They re-order or order in right relationship (*dikaïosynē* or righteousness/justice, a strong Matthean theme) not just the human but the other-than-human and the interrelationship of the two.

This is the most explicit, the most material of Jesus’ ethical teaching. As you do this re-ordering of relationships both material and social, among “the least”/lowest in status, you are doing it to me/*emoi*. When you do not do this re-ordering of relationships among “the least”, you are not doing it to me/*emoi*.

This is an ethic for the *now* of the Matthean community and for the *now* of communities today. It is an ethic that can catch the human and other-than-human in a re-ordering of right relationships. If such an ethic, such a right ordering, were to be undertaken by today’s human communities in their relationships with all in the other-than-human communities around planet Earth, this would truly manifest the *basileia* of the heavens (the kin[g]dom of the heavens or the skies, the heart of Jesus message – Mt 3:2; 4:17; 5:3, 10, 19; 7:21; 10:7).

*The last great parable of Matthew’s gospel has inspired heroic and hidden “works of mercy” toward all those in the human community who suffer in any way. So, too, may it now, through Pope Francis’s proclamation of care for our common home, inspire new heroic and hidden works of mercy that will ensure care for not only our planet but also our cosmos.*

## New Works of Mercy

It is to such a re-ordering of right relationships especially between the human and other-than-human communities that Pope Francis directs us in *Show Mercy to Our Common Home*, his message for the celebration of the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation last year.

Francis says again what he made clear in *Laudato Si’* that the “sufferings of the poor” and the “devastation of the environment” (LS par 1) are intimately connected. He names crimes against the natural world as “sin” (LS par 2). So this allows us to place them within the Matthean

gospel’s call to repentance, the message of both John the Baptist (Mt 3:2) and Jesus (Mt 4:17).

Then, informed by this great Matthean parable, Pope Francis named an eighth corporal and an eighth spiritual work of mercy: care for our common home.

He said: “Let me propose a complement to the two traditional sets of seven: may the works of mercy also include care for our common home.

“As a *spiritual* work of mercy, care for our common home calls for a “grateful contemplation of God’s world” (LS par 214) which “allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us (LS par 85).

“As a *corporal* work of mercy, care for our common home requires “simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness” and “makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world” (LS par 230-31).

The last great parable of Matthew’s gospel has inspired heroic and hidden “works of mercy” toward all those in the human community who suffer in any way. So, too, may it now, through Pope Francis’s proclamation of care for our common home, inspire new heroic and hidden works of mercy that will ensure care for not only our planet but also our cosmos.

The celebration of the Cosmic Christ on 26 November with the last great parable of Jesus invites us to ponder more deeply the call of Pope Francis to this eighth work of mercy: care for our common home. ■

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