Matthew | The election and the elect

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Alison Sampson ~ Matthew 25:31-46

One thing I find enraging is this: a politician who claims to be Christian, but slashes health care and public education and seeks to be 'tough on crime.' You know the sort I mean. They're a big fan of tax breaks for corporations and billionaires. They pray loudly and often, and insist their minions pray with them, then send the kids identified male at birth to kill and be killed at war.

What else? They quote scripture to prove women are helpmeets and gays are sinners and children must obey their dads no matter what. They love a godly war. And they are convinced of their own righteousness. For very often they seem to be showered with money, power and prestige, and this only validates their view. They know how it goes: be Righteous, follow the Law, and you shall be greatly blessed.

We've just heard a long strange story about sheep and goats and blessings. Like the politician just described, the people who first heard Jesus' story assumed that blessing is linked to following religious rules. It's a pretty mainstream view, and you can find it in the Old Testament. But the thing is this: there are two theological strands in the Old Testament: the priests and the prophets. These strands mingled and overlapped, but they focused on different things. Most importantly for today, their views on righteousness and blessing diverged.

One strand, largely but not entirely the priests, became highly concerned with personal purity. They're the ones who obsessed over the Law, and what happened when they touched a person with a skin disease, and whether Jesus and his disciples ritually cleaned a plate before they ate their dinner. This view was most often held by those in power.

The other strand, largely but not entirely the prophets, became highly concerned with neighbourliness. They're the ones who obsessed over social justice, and whether the hungry were fed, the sick were cared for, and the stranger was welcomed in. Their view was most often spoken to power, often at great personal cost. (Of course, both groups were concerned with all of life; this is just a very rough guide.)

What Jesus does in his story, then, is take the minority prophetic line. Although he talks about blessing, he doesn't mention Righteousness or the Law the way people expect from a religious leader. Instead, he says that the blessed are those who care for vulnerable people. That is, blessed are those who feed, welcome and clothe people; who care for the sick; who visit the imprisoned. And just in case we miss it the first time, he says it all three times more. Feed, welcome, clothe, care, visit times four means it's really, really, really, really important and disciples should pay attention.

But before all you most excellent and active Uniting Church folk burn out finding hungry homeless sick people to care for, know that this story is not about individuals but groups. Jesus is addressing the ethne, from which we get the word 'ethnic'; it means 'nation' or 'people group.' So this is a corporate teaching, directed to the nation or people group we belong to. As individuals, we're part of the nation and we each have responsibilities of our own, but to use highly technical language we're not personally responsible for all the everythings. We're not here for burnout.

Instead, our nation, our state, our city council and even our church are answerable to Jesus about what sort of society we build. Working together, do we feed, welcome and clothe people? Do we make try to ensure that people are not hungry, thirsty or unhoused anymore? Do we care for the sick? Do we treat prisoners with dignity? Then we'll know God's blessing and great flourishing and the kingdom's peace and joy.

If we don't do these things, however, we will know fire. But before you freak out over some terrible vision of the afterlife, take a deep breath and listen. Because this is not some post-death future that Jesus is describing. Instead, he's simply pointing out the consequences of choosing against love and care.

We see what can happen when people are dispossessed. Angry people vote for angry politicians. Gun violence explodes. Desperate Palestinians attack a kibbutz; South African townships are racked with pain; private security goes through the roof; the streets become unsafe. But if we choose to be a generous gentle society, where people are cared for and resources shared, we'll all know great blessing and human flourishing.

This week, we're heading into an election. Many of us are feeling that there are no great options right now. Even so, some party politics will

dispossess the vulnerable even further and only stoke the rage, while others will move us a little closer to kindness.

What do I mean by this? Any party which denigrates women, queer folk and brown people, any party which slashes supports for the poor and disabled while offering tax breaks to the rich, and any party which seeks to rip up Treaty will put us on the path to fire. On the other hand, any party which raises up women, queer folk and brown people, and supports the vulnerable through a billionaire tax, and upholds the hard-won justice of Treaty, will take us a little closer to flourishing. So even if all you want to do is cast a protest vote, choose carefully: for one major-minor party will lead towards hellfire, while the other just might lead to life.

As for the faith asserted by any individual politician, be wise. The Presbyterian Senator-elect to Texas, James Talarico, said it well. 'Don't tell me what you believe,' he said. 'Show me how you treat other people, and I will tell you what you believe.'

So don't let any Bible-quoting hymn-singing we-are-a-Christian-nation speak fool you. Just look at people's policies, and look at whether they approach vulnerable people as precious people needing care, or as scapegoats to be blamed and vilified. Some marginalise and punish the vulnerable, and will lead us straight to hellfire; others seek to serve, and will help build the kingdom of heaven. So in this and every election, let us vote wisely and well: and may God's will be done, God's love be shown. Baaaaaa. Ω

Reflect:

- What shapes your vote? Party loyalty, good information, strong emotion, or something else?
- Does faith impact your vote? How?
- Is Jesus inviting you to anything now?