

The Final Curtain

Picture the last act of Shakespeare's Macbeth or Hamlet or Romeo and Juliet. You have witnessed great human tragedy and there are bodies littering the stage. The play is now over and the curtain falls. You are left to ponder what you have witnessed and experienced, observed and absorbed. The curtain touches the stage floor and the spell of the theatrical moment is broken. Why? Well for one thing, the curtain rises again and all the actors (even the dead ones!) get up for the curtain call. Everybody who has been involved in the tapestry of life presented before your eyes comes on stage for your applause. The curtain is raised but then falls that final time. The final curtain is truly the end ... and we all go home.

It seems to me that we have a similar scene in Jesus' words about the Last Judgement. If all the world's a stage and we are actors upon it then we will all stand on the stage for that final curtain call. The drama of life will have been played out – we will have played our parts – all that will be left will be the applause or the boos. We might even look around us confident that we will be applauded (after all each of us has been the good guy, the hero) and making sure that there are others around us who have played the bad guy, the villain, the rogue. If life is an audition for heaven then there are a lot of hopefuls on that stage.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”
(Matthew 25:31-46 ESV)

At first glance my picture is brilliantly apt. Life is a stage, we are all actors upon it, and God will judge our lives according to our performance. When that final curtain falls, those on Jesus' right enter God's kingdom because of their social consciousness (feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the ill and prisoner, welcoming the stranger). Those on Jesus' left flunk out in a big way (their help of those in need was more to smile and send them away). So it seems that our heavenly reward or eternal punishment is the result of our behaviour here on earth.

But something is not quite right with this interpretation. For a start the king calls the 'kingdom prepared for you' an inheritance and you really can't earn an inheritance. And secondly both the sheep and the goats seem mystified by how the King has made his judgement – the sheep didn't know that they were serving Jesus when they served the people around them and the goats didn't know they were rejecting Jesus when they didn't serve those people around them. The king has to explain it to

both groups. As you did it to the least you did it to me. As you didn't do it to the least you didn't do it to me.

Upon further reflection we are led to further speculations and questions. If I've given a cup of water to a thirsty person will I be a sheep? If I don't give someone a drink am I a goat? Do I have to give drinks to the whole world or will just a few drinks do? What standard of social consciousness and humanitarian care is required by this king? Is it true that the goats have never performed an act of kindness towards another person in their lives? Are they the most cruel of people? When you stop and think through this scene you may be left none the wiser. At first glance the whole scene smacks of works righteousness. Yet Jesus made it clear that it is a picture of the Last Judgement, the final curtain in the drama of life – but possibly we may have lost the plot.

One day our world will stop. Ipswich, Brandon, Cambridge, Coventry, the bases, England, the US, Australia will have no significance to us anymore. Nothing that we have created with our hands will be noticed when the Lord Jesus returns in all his glory together with all the angels. The Lord will separate the sheep from the goats, the saved from the condemned, and the final curtain will be about to fall for ever. The sheep will receive the inheritance prepared by God which testifies that they are part of God's family and kingdom. To not receive the inheritance is to be labelled a goat – which is a different species of animal all together.

Salvation is God's business. It would seem that God is in the changing-goats-into-sheep business. Impossible for us to perform but with God nothing is impossible. Scripture says: If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). Scripture declares that through Baptism God kills and makes alive – our sinful selves are drowned and we have a new life with Christ. To be sure our sinful selves are good swimmers or, to use the image of our text, God's sheep still can act the goat but our lives in God's kingdom are ones of living out who we are despite our sins and fears. And the Christian through faith knows that he/she is a child of God.

It is only through Jesus that the sheep have an imperishable, undefiled, and unfading inheritance. He has prepared it all – through his life, death, and resurrection – and gives it freely to all people. God wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

And this knowledge is not just head knowledge, a verbal assent, a religious mantra that we can quickly recite while we go about doing our own thing. This knowledge is lived out. When Jesus tells the sheep why they are with him he is describing the evidence of what is essentially hidden – their faith. Jesus was not describing the reason for their salvation. Faith in Jesus alone saves us. Trusting that Jesus is holding onto us in every circumstance – even when our eyes and bodies scream otherwise – is faith. If faith in Jesus is real then it will be evidenced in the fruit of faith. A light isn't really a light unless the shines out. (How else will you know it's there?)

If all the world is a stage and we are actors on it then this final curtain call is part of the script. It also means that all our life is scripted – not so much every word and action but a general direction allowing lots of improvisation. It would be utter chaos if all the actors on a stage just said and did as they wished. Often that's exactly how our life seems to be – people running around trying to get other people to follow their script. But our world has a script. God provides the best message of all through the Good News about his Son. God creates faith in Christians so that they can follow the script. The evidence of this is genuine, radical, consistent love. Love in your homes, in your relationships, and to those around you. It is the same sort of love with which Jesus loves us – undeserved but very real.

This final curtain reminds us that Jesus has prepared our salvation for us and for everyone. We receive it by faith and if it's real it is evidenced in love.