

What's the difference between a sheep and a goat?

Quite a lot, you might think, if you live in the Glossop area. Mostly goats are smooth coated with obvious beards and can come in a variety of colours; mostly sheep are woolly and white....

But if you're around Jerusalem and the guide says 'look at the sheep' you say 'which are the sheep?' because sheep and goats are both pretty skinny, both have smooth coats and both come in a variety of colours. It's not easy to tell the difference at all. How do you tell them apart? So when you are living your life in the chaotic mix of human beings that is our world, with everybody wanting to believe that they are worth their place in heaven, given that nobody walks around with a real halo over their heads, how will God tell ever tell the difference at the end of time? How does he separate the sheep from the goats?

I've got three questions for us all as we think of what Jesus said: **Are we kind? Are we gracious? Are we proud?**

### **Are we kind?**

In the previous few chapters of the gospel, Jesus has been talking about the end of time. It's coming close to his death and he wants people to be prepared for the future and live as if they really mean it for God. Amongst other things he has had a real go at the Pharisees for their petty little rules and regulations that get in the way of what really matters. The attention to detail has gone too far. They've lost the plot.

Perhaps it's a bit like our health and safety rules. Schools and businesses and churches can't move without risk assessments, can't touch a child, and can't put children in cars without five pages of paperwork... I asked a member of staff at one school what she would do when a child fell over and cut himself and started to bleed, given that they're not supposed to even put a plaster on these days. She

said she would pick the child up, give him a cuddle and put a plaster on....To my great relief, kindness and common sense would prevail.

Jesus story talks about being kind to people who are sick or in prison or thirsty or needing clothes or a visit or a sense of welcome. He doesn't talk about needing to get the health and safety policy right.

*When I came to Hayfield I realized that I lived fairly near to the man who had been my Vicar when I was growing up. I decided to pay him a visit, having not seen him for years.*

*He had helped my mother through a difficult period of time, befriended my brother, taken his wedding and my mother's funeral, having been with us at her bedside within an hour of her death.*

*I arranged to call. I was a bit irritated that when I arrived, someone else was there, smoking like a chimney...then I remembered it had always been like that in the Vicarage. Always somebody who was virtually living with them, or being helped by them...Then we talked in his study and I became aware that our theological views were totally at odds, our views on church life were way apart, we thought differently about worship and we saw our role as ministers differently too.*

*But when I came home, I realized that actually none of that mattered. What mattered was that he had been kind to my family.*

**Are we kind?**

## **2. Are we gracious?**

Now I would add to that little story that I believe very firmly that Christians need to work hard at trying to know what is true about God. We can't get rid of the Bible or pretend it doesn't matter to try to understand what beliefs are right. We find our way to heaven by faith in Jesus, not by trying to do better than our neighbour because neither of us will be good enough. But once we start trusting God, we should start living a better life.

We need, as someone once put it, lots more G+T- grace and truth. What the Pharisees missed out on was grace, and so do we sometimes. The ability to be generous with our kindness.

You see all of us find it easy to be kind to friends. It's not that much of a challenge to be kind to someone who likes you, and who will say thank you and who you enjoy being with. It's much more of a challenge to be kind to people who you do not like, who may not like you (even when you are kind).

The people in Jesus' story were *not* worthwhile people:

- Hungry and thirsty people were probably hungry and thirsty because they weren't working. Why give up your own hard-earned food for someone who just can't be bothered to fend for themselves?
- strangers might not do their best for the community since the land wasn't their inheritance, in fact they would take some of the land for themselves which meant less for the permanent residents. why should incomers get away with putting up house prices, commuters who never join in with the village life, never use the village shops;
- people with no clothing were beggars. Why should people who sponge off social services get our help?
- people who were sick were unproductive – we've got enough to do looking after ourselves without anyone else
- people who were in prison had done something wrong

These were not the world's 'worthwhile' people. The people in the parable didn't think they had mistreated anybody because they didn't recognize them, because they weren't looking for those kinds of people to help.

They may not be at the top of your list of those you feel deserve help. But the problem we've got is that if we want to be like Jesus, we have to help them anyway. When he was in his last days on earth, he didn't say: 'Send everyone else away; I want to be with my family and nobody else.' He talked about helping the people who didn't deserve it; then he died to help people who didn't deserve it. Grace.

**Are we gracious?**

### **3. Are we proud?**

You may be kind, you may be kind to people who don't really deserve it. The Mothers' Union is renowned for caring for people who are at a disadvantage in life's lottery and the projects represented tonight show that.

But there's one last question: are we proud?

When we've been kind, can we forget it and go and do something for someone else or do we have that little demon on our shoulder patting us on the back and saying: *Well done. what a tremendously kind and unselfish person you are to have done that.....*

Or is it that you don't mind being kind but you'd rather like to be thanked for it. *With some folk on Saturday...stopped at café for lunch...I said I would pay....debate...I said I would like to (and it was true!) chose, bought, paid for...glad to do it. Enjoyed being able to do it. But found myself thinking later 'they didn't say thank you'*

It won't stop me wanting to do the same again but it shows that I wasn't quite so selfless as I would have liked if I needed to be thanked to feel it was worthwhile.

In Jesus' story the people who came out best were those who hadn't even realized or perhaps they'd forgotten about the ones they had helped.

### **Are we kind? Are we gracious? Are we proud?**

That's just about wiped all of us off the qualification list then! Sheep and goats are hard to separate. Sometimes we're not so very different as we might like to think. So it's just as well that Jesus doesn't work out whether we are worth his effort either. We're not, but he is kind, he is gracious and amazingly enough, he goes on loving us even when we forget to say thank you.

That is why we need to go on answering God's call to help those who need it most.