

26.11.23 Christ the King

Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24

¹¹ For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹² As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³ I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. ¹⁴ I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. ¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

²⁰ Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹ Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, ²² I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

²³ I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴ And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.

Matt 25: 31 to end The Judgement of the Nations

³¹ When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, 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 by my Father, 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, "Lord, 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 king 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,^[a] you did it to me." ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

Prayer

May these spoken words be faithful to the written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sermon

At last, we have arrived at the end of our journey through the Christian year. We've journeyed with Christ through all the seasons of his life – his birth, his growing up, his public ministry, his death, and his resurrection. And here we are, the last Sunday, known as Christ the King, and singing 'Crown him with many crowns, crowning him the Lord of love, the Lord of peace, the Lord of years.'

Christ the King comes to us in many ways throughout our lives and over the Christian year, and he presents us with different faces and different facets of his kingdom.

So, what kind of King is the Christ?
Who is the Christ that we share?
What's new about the Kingdom he is bringing in?

In Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, we're introduced to our Infant King, and his Kingdom of humility, vulnerability, dependency.

Then there is a big window of 30 years, when we have our Hidden King – the child, teenager, the young man, and we learn of a Kingdom where God is at work in the everyday of life.

And during the 3 years of his public ministry, we have...

our Healing King, our Servant King – and a kingdom in which compassion and care for others are priorities.

We have our Humiliated King dying on a cross and then Triumphant – death defeated, hope renewed.

And we have our Eucharistic King – assuring us of Christ's presence in the bread and wine.

This is the King that we share!

But there is another facet of Christ the King that we share today, and that is Christ our Shepherd King.

No doubt, we are all aware of the imagery of Shepherds and sheep in the Bible

- in the OT, 23rd Psalm, David the Shepherd-boy King,
- in the NT, the Good Shepherd

Our readings for Christ the King Sunday today encapsulate this imagery - Christ is a Shepherd King. So, let's look at what they have to say.

Ezekiel...

Now, Ezekiel was an interesting character – he speaks, falls down, walks about in a trance, sees strange things. Unsurprisingly according to some Jewish traditions, only people aged 30 and over were allowed to read his book! However, he was an active religious thinker and prophet, concerned about righteousness and justice in a time of exile. A time when the ancient peoples were in conflict, oppressed, wayward, scattered, lost! That's the context within which Ezekiel was speaking.

I wonder if that context sounds familiar to you today.

When we think of the situation between Israel and Gaza, do we too see lost flocks, scattered, injured and weak.

Do we ask, 'where is the Shepherd King now?'

Where is the righteousness in hostage-taking, where is the justice in killing children?

When has that action ever resolved anything?

Sometimes it's difficult for us to 'get our heads around it all!'

Indeed it may feel that we've jumped straight back into the OT with Ezekiel.

Yet, despite all this going on, Ezekiel begins to speak about restoration and hope. He speaks of the shepherd-nature of God, gathering together the sheep that have been lost or injured...

'God himself will be the shepherd of his sheep, ... make them lie down, seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak.

Such a positive hope-filled message. God will fix things!

Just leave it to God then,

We can sit back and watch God act.

Or can we?

I remember hearing a story when I was younger about a gardener – and it has always stayed with me.

It's about a newly appointed pastor who went to visit the home of a congregation member. Upon arriving there, he discovered his host was an avid gardener, and was only too delighted to show his pastor around the garden, a magnificent sea of greens, purples, blues, whites, yellows, and pinks. Not unlike that of this Cathedral. Wanting to

set the relationship off on a strong, positive note, the pastor said, "Praise God for the beauty of his handiwork".

But his host replied in a somewhat different tone, "Now pastor, don't go giving all the credit to God. You should have seen this garden when the Almighty had it to himself!" I think perhaps Nigel would empathise with that sentiment.

The gardener in fact had very good theology. God has designed the world in such a way that God works in partnership with us, and we with God, to achieve God's ends.

Partnership.

A word that leads us directly to our second reading from Matthew.

Jesus is very clear here about what is expected of us.

He expects us to partner with him in bringing about God's Kingdom, and to be an active partner. Being made in God's image, we too need to be shepherds by looking out for the vulnerable, the strangers, the sick, because, as Jesus says...

"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."

But partnering 'Christ the King' is no easy task.

Most of us here show kindness and compassion towards others as we go about our life. Many go the 'extra mile' for others. But do we always show it to the people we disagree with, the ones who maybe have hurt us.

Most of us here will be horrified with conflict between Israel and Gaza, between Ukraine and Russia. There's nothing so soul distressing that to see a need in others and feel helpless do to something about it.

Most of us are shocked with the impact of Climate Change on the planet.

How does Christ the Shepherd King expect us to act under these circumstances?

How do we partner Christ and make a difference in the world?

Maybe there's a time when perhaps we need to discern what we can do, and what God is doing. You may know the serenity prayer....

Lord, grant me the strength to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

So, what God may be doing in the Middle East is working in partnership with the help agencies, individuals who have his Shepherd heart. And what we do here as

church, may be through prayer, through witness, through calling out injustice where we see it.

And what God is doing here on the Island in partnership with us, is building a community which is loving, forgiving, compassionate, inclusive – after all, this is what we, Cathedral people, are about, this is the reason for the refurbishment of the building, to facilitate outreach, to bring Christ to the vulnerable, the injured, to bring in the scattered, to bring in the lost.

And everyone here can make a difference – as the late Desmond Tutu said....

“Do your little bit of good where you are; it is those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.”

In our reading, Jesus also tells us a short parable about sheep and goats and the inference is that we are acting either as one or the other.

To be honest, being compared to either animal doesn't feel greatly complimentary! Sheep have the reputation of being rather mindless creatures, good for wool, food, and sacrifice. And goats have a reputation for mischievous behaviour and being wayward. It would take a stretch of the imagination to use these images as a metaphors for a person, although goats maybe have the edge!

Yet Jesus says he's going to separate us out in the end.
So what quality is Jesus looking for in us, in order to make such a judgement?
As you likely have guessed, the real point of this parable is the difference in behaviour of the 2 animals.

Sheep are portrayed as merciful, kind, generous, loving and willing to do whatever it takes, even at their own expense, to help out another in true need. Jesus regarded their actions as personally affecting him.

The "sheep," because of their unselfishness and giving behaviour, inherit God's kingdom, they are close to God.

The other group, the "goats," is portrayed as selfish, self-centred, and self-seeking. Their behaviour separates them from God and his Kingdom, it separates them from God who is love.

Indeed, we can sum the parable up in the word 'love'.
No love, no Kingdom.

Christ is our Shepherd King.

Where do we see him in our lives?

When we long to share something that's wrong but are fearful of being judged – do we catch the voice of Jesus?

Where do we see him in the lives of others?

When we speak to someone feeling low, someone who can only find release in not eating, or in self-harming, whose thoughts turn towards ending their life – do we see Christ in their suffering?

As the song says....

*To the lost Christ shows his face;
to the unloved he gives his embrace;
to those who cry in pain or disgrace,
Christ, makes, with his friends, a touching place*

Musical reflection...

*Christ's is the world in which we move.
Christ's are the folk we're summoned to love,
Christ's is the voice which calls us to care,
and Christ is the one who meets us here.*

To the lost Christ shows his face;
to the unloved he gives his embrace;
to those who cry in pain or disgrace,
Christ, makes, with his friends, a touching place

Feel for the people we most avoid.
Strange or bereaved or never employed;
Feel for the women and feel for the men
fear that their living is all in vain.

Feel for the parents who lost their child,
feel for the woman whom men have defiled.
Feel for the baby for whom there's no breast,
and feel for the weary who find no rest.

Feel for the lives by life confused.
Riddled with doubt, in loving abused;
feel for the lonely heart, conscious of sin,
which longs to be pure but fears to begin.

*John L. Bell (born 1949) and Graham Maule (1958-2019)
Tune: DREAM ANGUS (Scottish lullaby arranged by John L. Bell)*

