

Sermon for Sunday 26 November 2023 – Christ the King

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Ezekiel 34.11-16,20-24; Psalm 95.1-7; Ephesians 1.15-23; Matthew 25.31-46

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please do be seated.

So today is the last day of the Church's liturgical year and we celebrate today as Christ the King Sunday. So it's an opportunity to look back at the year that has passed and to see in what ways we have allowed Christ to rule in the life of our Church and in our own hearts. And it's an opportunity to look forward to a new year that's about to start on Advent Sunday next week. And within our Bible readings during the Kingdom season and in Advent, there is a sense of judgement. And we might not like the idea of being judged.

So what does it mean to be judged by Christ? I think his judgement is that we are worthy of dying for, that we are loved, that we're sheep of his own fold. And then the question is, what do we do with that? If that is so, if that is how we are loved, how is our discipleship and our faith and our life shaped by that knowledge, by that love of Christ?

So the prophet Ezekiel, in our first reading today, received words of judgement from God. The prophet Ezekiel was writing at a time of exile. He was writing from Babylon, far from the land of Israel, far from his spiritual home, writing about 600 years before Christ. And he's asking himself, how did this judgement come about that we, the people of Israel, are here? And he kind of saw that as being the fault of the people of Israel.

So far had they strayed, so far had they fallen into sin and compromise. So far had they adopted other religions that they'd lost that calling from God to be the people of God, a light to lighten the Gentiles, a people to call all others to the one true God. They'd lost that calling. And so they had been judged and they had been taken away into exile in Babylon. And the shepherds who should have led the people had failed.

So that's the perspective that Ezekiel has on how it is that he's far from home and in exile. And then he receives this rather lovely reading that we've had this morning. A promise, a prophecy that God will bring his people home. He won't abandon his people, but like a shepherd will gather his people and bring them home to good pasture. God Himself will be a shepherd to his scattered and lost people. Why? Because he loves them.

Did you see the story on the news a couple of days ago, or a couple of weeks ago, about Fiona the sheep? Fiona was a sheep in Scotland who two years ago fell down a cliff and landed on a beach, and she was not noticed as being absent. She spent two years living at the bottom of a cliff by the sea and no one noticed that she was missing. And a passing boat saw her, and some intrepid farmers were sent to

rescue Fiona. She was dragged back up the cliff and restored to her flock. So I thought that was a rather a good illustration of the experience that the prophet Ezekiel is feeling in Babylon. Lost, far away, unnoticed and abandoned. But just like Fiona, the sheep, God will search for his lost and scattered sheep and bring them home to good pasture.

Save the flock from being ravaged by other animals. And he's going to judge between the fat, lazy sheep and the lean fit-for-purpose sheep. And for the lean, fit-for-purpose sheep there'll be a new good shepherd, a new King David, who will nurture, protect and lead the sheep, the people of God in the ways of righteousness. So Ezekiel lays out a pattern. There is sin, there's judgement for sin, but then there's redemption, the opportunity for a fresh new start when the people come back to God and he brings them home to Himself.

The letter that we heard in our second reading this morning, the Letter to the Ephesians, presents to us a glimpse of the character portrait of the church in Ephesus. The letter is written six or seven hundred years after the prophet Ezekiel. And Ephesus was a great pagan religious centre, a cultural Greek centre, a place where people gathered to worship Artemis, a fertility god. It was a resort town, a very wealthy place, so plenty of opportunities and temptations for the people of God to be led astray from the church and to be drawn into a worldly life or a life of compromise, or a life of pursuing other religions. And the author rejoices in the fact that the church hasn't done that, but rather generates a spirit of faith and community inspired by their love of Christ and of his for them, so that Christ really does rule in this church, in this place.

And the church is a community of caring in Ephesus; it wasn't just a gathering of individuals who had a few things in common and met one another on a Sunday morning, it was a family of believers. We all of us like to have a sense of belonging, don't we? And we get our sense of belonging from family, from place, from work, from familiar geography and from church membership. And that was just so in Ephesus at that time. People had a sense of belonging, family, city, culture, all those things were important. But belonging in the church in Ephesus, ruled over by Christ Jesus as shepherd of his own flock, gave to the members there a sense of identity, a sense of place, a sense of relationship, a sense of acceptance and love. And those were the results of the good Shepherd Christ Jesus gathering his sheep into one, making individuals into one flock, one family that met in his name.

And I suggest that the church can still be like that in our own times, in our own places, a sense of community and a place of belonging. Jesus has drawn us to Himself and has made us welcome. And in his name we welcome one another in love and we sustain and build a sense of community. And that sense of community is defined by the relationships that we have for one another, to pray for each other, to care for each other, to befriend, to support, to encourage all these things in Christ's name, build his kingdom amongst us and equip us to build his kingdom in the world. And that's what we celebrate today. And we live at a time when our culture, as in Ephesus, is quite capable of making people feel isolated, alone, bereaved overlooked, unworthy, unloved. The Church, in its nature and its character can challenge all those things in the name of Christ and gather people together as one flock with one shepherd under our Father in Heaven.

So there's a great contrast, I feel, in the mood between Ezekiel's context and Ephesus, where we see the Spirit of Christ working in his church, enabling the Church to flourish and make a difference in the world.

In the Gospel reading today, in our third reading, Jesus is teaching his disciples. The context is that Jesus has left the temple in Jerusalem knowing that the authorities there, the religious leaders who were supposed to be good shepherds, good leaders of their people, serving God, were failing. They were repeating the errors of Ezekiel's day. Now, Matthew wrote after the temple of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in the war of AD 70. So for Matthew and for his first readers, the judgement of God was very evident.

Jerusalem was in ruins, the temple was destroyed, and the people of God were scattered far and wide because Jerusalem was no more and the Romans had driven them away. And so Matthew writes that Jesus says, 'the nations will be judged, the sheep and the goats will be separated one from another'. And the criteria for judgement will be the ways in which the hungry have been fed, the thirsty given a drink, the stranger welcomed, the naked clothed, the sick cared for and the prisoner visited. It's interesting in the reading, those who have done these things are not immediately aware that they've done them. They say to Jesus, well, when was it that we did any of these things? Because they're not aware that they've done them, but rather out of a natural spirit of care and love and faithfulness, they've served the kingdom of God and enabled Christ's ministry to make a difference in the world.

And those who were judged unfavourably are those who had the opportunity to serve but did not. And they did not because they were so self-absorbed that even the idea of helping somebody else never even seems to have crossed their minds. And who are the little ones, the least of these, who Jesus is talking about? Some commentators say that it's the Church, the Church that was scattered from the destroyed Jerusalem, scattered into the nations. How were they received and cared for in the places where they ended up? But other commentators say it's much bigger than that. It's much broader than that. It's a challenge to the nations on behalf of all those who are in need.

So the images of destruction that we've seen in Gaza would look very like Jerusalem after the Romans had finished with it. The way that Europe looked in 1945 might be another image. The way that Somalia this week has been completely swamped by floods and people have lost everything. The way that we wrestle and agonise about what to do with the people who seek refuge in our country as they risk their lives in small boats to get here; how do we respond to these things? We might, in our own context, know loved ones, friends, neighbours, in all sorts of kinds of need.

There's no end to the opportunity in our world to take seriously the things that Christ says to us. Christ says he will be the judge of the nations; not at some future point, not only in the future, when he comes again, as we look forward to and pray for, but now. Because when we pray in Advent, we pray that he will come afresh among us; not just whenever, but now.

So what will we do now? Because his judgement is now, and the Church has a place in the life of the nations. We are the established church of our nation. There's a community of believers in every benefice in our land. So what will we do with the judgement of Christ?

We, who are sheep, who have been gathered together in his name, we who are loved so much that he died for us, what will we do with that? And his judgement is that we are given the opportunity to serve and to love as he has loved and served us. And through prayer and worship and love and community and welcome, the Holy Spirit will take us, mould us, shape us and use us, so that even without thinking about it, we will do these things. It will become part of our DNA.

So as we look forward to Advent and we pray for Christ's coming again, that is our response to his judgement. That he will indeed do those things. That he will be our Lord, that he will come quickly, that he will be our shepherd, that he will lead us into good pasture, and that when we find that pasture and that refreshment in his name, we invite others to find their rest in our Lord. In Jesus name. Amen.