

CHRIST THE KING

Pentecost 25 Year A – Christ the King

Ezek. 34:11-16; 20-24; Ps. 100; Eph. 1:15-23; Mt. 25:31-46

Tannum 22/11/2020

Today is traditionally known as *Christ the King* Sunday. It's the day that we celebrate Christ as the Almighty King before whom all the world will bow and acknowledge as Lord and Saviour.

On this day we come to the end of the cycle of the church's year—having begun with Advent and Christmas, we followed the drama of the birth of Jesus, his life of teaching and healing to his suffering and death, we rejoiced in his resurrection, we have shared the life of the Spirit poured out at Pentecost on the first believers, and we have sought to share the Gospel and its implications in the continuing life of the church in the world. At the end of the cycle of the festivals of the year we look to the end, not just the conclusion but the completion, the perfection, the fulfilment of the purpose towards which all that Jesus did was directed. We anticipate the establishment of the Kingdom of God when his glory will be fully revealed and his power will be exercised fully and openly. [*See Col. 1:15-20, Rev. 1:4-8; 7:9-17*]

The Scriptures give us many images of Christ as King—his power, his authority, his care and compassion. Each of the texts this morning highlight some specific aspect of his nature and authority. It seems, though, that when we compare the passage from the book of Ezekiel and the passage from Matthew's account of the gospel, there is a somewhat of a contrast—some may even say contradiction—in the way Christ's kingship is understood.

Ezekiel portrays God as a shepherd—a shepherd who cares for his sheep, protects them and provides them with shelter and pasture. The image of Christ as shepherd is a delightful one—conjuring up images of those old paintings where Jesus is pictured out in a green field, shepherds crook in one hand, surrounded by cute fluffy white sheep, grazing peacefully on the lush pasture. Jesus is usually pictured with a lamb over his shoulders, representing the lost sheep that went astray and is now found. It's a beautiful image.

In his book, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, Philip Keller recounts his own experience of raising sheep. He tells how ewes, ready to bear offspring, when chased by dogs or other predators will lose their unborn lambs. A shepherd's loss from such attacks can be appalling. One morning he found nine of his choicest ewes, all soon to lamb, lying dead where a cougar had harassed the flock during the night.

It was a terrible shock to someone new to the business of raising sheep. From then on, he slept with a rifle and torch by his bed. At the least sound of the flock being disturbed,

he would leap from his bed and, calling his faithful collie, and dash out into the night, rifle in hand, ready to protect his sheep.

In the course of time, he came to realize that nothing so quieted and reassured the sheep as to see him in the field. The presence of their master and owner and protector put them at ease as nothing else could, and this applied to both day and night. The sheep look to the shepherd for protection. The good shepherd knows his sheep and is known by his sheep.

There is an amusing story about a guide for a party of English tourists in Palestine some years ago who was describing some of the customs of the Middle East. “Now,” he said, “you are accustomed to seeing the shepherd following his sheep through the English lanes and countryside. In the East, however, things are different, for the shepherd always leads the way, going on before the flock. And the sheep always follow him, for they know his voice.”

As the party reached Palestine, the tourists couldn’t help but notice that almost the first sight to greet them was a flock of sheep being driven by a man from behind—not led. The guide was astonished. Immediately he accosted the shepherd. “How is it that you are driving these sheep?” he asked. “I have always been told that Eastern shepherds lead their sheep.” “You are quite right, sir,” replied the man. “The shepherd does lead his sheep. But you see I’m not the shepherd, I’m the butcher!” There is a vast difference between the interest of a shepherd and the interest of a butcher. Jesus is described as a gentle shepherd, a shepherd who knows his sheep and is known by them. A shepherd even willing to lay down his life for his sheep.

Can you imagine the greatest man who ever lived laying down his life for a dumb, smelly sheep? If you can, then you know what it means to say that the Lord of all the universe laid down his life for you and me. The gentle shepherd.

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But there is yet another image of Christ in the scriptures that appears at first to be radically different from that of the gentle shepherd. Our text from Matthew portrays Jesus as the righteous king and judge who separates the sheep from the goats—who glorifies the sheep and condemns the goats to eternal damnation. It’s not an image to which we are readily attracted.

This is not a side of the Gospel we like to deal with nowadays. Somehow, in our modern society it just doesn’t fit. We want a “gentle Jesus meek and mild.” We want a Jesus who overlooks our faults, who is blind to our shortcomings, who deliberately ignores our sin and rebellion. We don’t want someone else determining the state of our future. We’re supposed to be the masters of our own fate.

This passage, which is often referred to as the parable of the sheep and goats, is not really a parable at all—it's a statement of what will happen in the time of judgement—more particularly it is about those who will be able to enter the Kingdom of God and those who will not. The Son of Man—a term Jesus often uses to refer to himself—sits on the throne of judgement, separating the sheep from the goats.

In one sense, the image of shepherd is still present. It was very common in Jesus' day for herds of sheep and goats to graze together. At the end of each day the sheep and the goats would be separated and placed in their respective pens for the night. Christ's judgement of the world is conducted in a similar way and it would seem that the criteria for entrance into the Kingdom has something to do with the way we treat others—how we exercise compassion towards our fellow brothers and sisters.

But who, really, are those whom Jesus describes as “the least of these who are members of my family”? Most likely, Jesus is especially referring to those of his followers who were being persecuted because of their witness to Christ. Giving a cup of water to any of them when they were in need or in prison was the same as giving it to Christ himself, for they are his representatives standing in his place.

It has become very common, today, to apply this passage only in the general sense of our social obligations to whoever may be in need, as in the parable of the Good Samaritan (*Luke 10:29-37*). It's easy to see this passage as saying that we are to love our neighbour and serve those in need or else we will have to answer for it at the end! That's a fair interpretation, but, it's not the whole story. At the same time, it refers to the responsibility that believers have to meet the needs of people who are struggling in Christ's mission in the world and suffer as a result. It's important for us to keep that primary meaning as our focus because it's easy for us to fall into the popular trap of simply reducing the work of the church to that of social welfare as though that was the sole value of Jesus' teaching. Unfortunately, that's how many, both inside and outside the church, see it.

But we still have a problem. In this passage the basis by which we are judged is not confession of faith in Christ as we might have assumed. Bear in mind also the fact that both the sheep and the goats in Jesus' story are part of the one flock. Both the sheep and the goats openly declare Jesus as Lord, yet the goats are excluded from the kingdom regardless. Both the sheep and the goats, together, is an image of those who are *within* the church. But, nothing is said of grace, justification or the forgiveness of sins. What counts, in this passage, is whether a person has acted out of love for those in need. These aren't extra brownie points we've earned or optional accessories to our faith. In the final judgment, Jesus tells us in this passage, what will matter is how we've treated one another. (Makes you think, doesn't it, about how we do sometimes treat each other.)

So where does this passage leave us, in a tradition that's founded upon the grace of God—an all-encompassing love that is unconditional, that has no strings attached? This passage seems to leave us out in the dark, with us looking to see if we've earned enough points to get passage through the pearly gates, which, in the final accounting, to be honest, none of us will ever have, no matter how hard we try. There will be at least one time that we will have fallen short of overflowing generosity and compassion—very likely many more.

I believe, however, that faith in God *is* important here—that who you are, in Christ, *is* more important than what you do. But again we have to ask ourselves: What does it mean for us to be who we are, in Christ? How does our “being” influence our “doing”? What does it mean for us to live by faith in today's world? Is it simply by declaring that we are Christians, as though that grants us some special privilege—or is it displayed in what we do—in how we act in certain situations—in how we respond to the needs of others? Both, of course, are necessary and inseparable.

James says much the same thing when he states in *his* letter that those who say they have faith but do nothing, really don't have faith, because faith shows itself in our actions. Their religion is nothing more than a sham—a beautiful building on the outside, but totally empty on the inside—totally devoid of any compassion, showing a lack of any real understanding of the gospel.

You see, real faith is not inward looking, as so many today want to understand it. It's not a personal oneness with some greater being for our own comfort or benefit—something personal that we don't share with anyone else. Real faith is outward looking—it cannot be a selfish, self-absorbed thing. It must focus on the world that is around us. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are to bear one another up and show compassion for those who are in need.

May the way in which we live our lives truly reflect the faith that we confess, so that in the end we may stand before Christ, our King and judge and hear him say those words: “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

Jesus, the gentle shepherd who leads us beside still waters and protects us from our enemies is the same Jesus who sits on the throne as king and judge. The hope we have, is in the fact that the one who will be our judge is the same one whom we know as our shepherd—our Saviour, Christ our Lord and King.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.