

Sermon for 22 November 2020

St Andrew's, Newgate Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, Diocese of Newcastle

Christ the King – Ezekiel 34:11-24 [Ephesians 1:15-23] Matthew 25: 31-46

Collect for this Sunday, Christ the King:

*Eternal Father,
whose Son Jesus Christ ascended to the throne of heaven
that he might rule over all things as Lord and King:
keep the Church in the unity of the Spirit
and in the bond of peace,
and bring the whole created order to worship at his feet;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen*

IS THIS BEGINNING OF THE END, OR THE END OF THE BEGINNING? I

We now come to the end of the lectionary year A with Matthew's Gospel. Next week is Advent Sunday, the start of the new Church/liturgical year where we will be focussing on the Gospel of Mark during the year alongside the readings from the Old Testament, the Psalms, and the Epistles.

You may remember, Matthew's Gospel opens with the bold assertion that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of David and Abraham, concluding [chapter 28] with Jesus' claim to have been given all authority in heaven and earth, sending his disciples to make more disciples of all nations, promising his presence to the end of the age! Lurking behind the Gospel of Matthew is that enduring question from Jesus: **“Who do you say that I am?”**

While the last Sunday of the Church year is commonly known as Christ the King, it might be salutary to remind ourselves that we hold in some sort of tension both the humiliated Jesus and the victorious Christ, as witnessed through his short earthly ministry.

Our Scripture lessons for today are ever instructive:

Ezekiel 34:11-24 New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

God the True Shepherd

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.

¹⁷ As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats: ¹⁸ Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? ¹⁹ And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?

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.

Ezekiel wrote at a time when the ancient Israelites were in exile, far away from their homeland, having suffered much under a powerful foreign power [Babylonians] because their own rulers and religious leaders were spending more time looking after themselves than that of the people! Jerusalem has been overrun, practically destroyed.

God's prophet was speechless for a long while but now he is empowered to speak. Especially, to speak truth to power ... or, what remained of the old power!

Ezekiel 34:11-24 this entire passage is indicative of both judgement and hope:

- 34:7 "Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord"
- 34:10 "I am against the shepherds ... demand from them an account of my sheep ..."
- 34:13 "I will bring": the reference to restoration from exile becomes overt
- 34:14 "I will feed them with good pasture"
- 34:15 "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep"
- **The message is clearly against the failings of the [Davidic] monarchy, hence implying that God will reign as king.**
- 34:20 "I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep"
- **The role of judge is by no means incompatible with God's role as shepherd; the image of the shepherd caring for his sheep can seem an idyllic one**
- [NB. Yet, we need to bear in mind the harsh practical and economic realities of sheep rearing in ancient Israel, and any implications of this for the present metaphor.]

- The distinction now is made between the “fat sheep” and “my flock”: fat sheep will not form part of the restored community. It is best explained by observing that “fat sheep” is another way of speaking of the cruel and exploitative leaders and their time has now come to an end.
- A complex picture is portrayed here.

Alan Gaunt, a United Reformed Church minister and hymn-writer, reflected on this passage with ‘The fat sheep prayer’ (2011):

*God of justice,
in this world of wealth and poverty,
have mercy on us, your fat sheep,
warm and comfortable, eating our fill:
too often at the cost of other people’s lives,
and the hunger of other people’s children.*

The prophet continues with the word of God:

- 34:21 “... until you scattered them far and wide [that is, in every direction]”
- 34:22 “I will save my flock ...”
- 34:23 “I will set up over them one shepherd ...”: **moving at this point from divine shepherding to royal shepherding**
- 34:24 “And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them”: **NB. the prince as God’s viceroy** [compared, e.g., with colonial times – Viceroy of India, who acted on behalf of the monarch then]. Hence the image of divine shepherding is not downplayed at all but maintained!
- At the same time, “prince” itself represents a downgrading of royal language and Ezekiel’s use of it is “a deliberate archaizing”, an echo of the leadership patterns of pre-monarchic (that is, pre-King Saul) Israel
- Hence the use of “prince” in Ezekiel’s future expectations involves a critique of the monarchy. While “prince” is allowed a place within the divinely ordained system of government, it will only function effectively when radically subordinated to the will of God and to the real needs and interests of the community of the people of God.
- Now, that is a tall order indeed!

Alan Gaunt further reflects with a short prayer:

*We are constantly under your judgment,
failing to establish your justice;
and yet so often feeling helpless,
wondering what we can ever do
to make things right with the world.*

How then do we find meaning in such ancient texts for the way our own Church lives its life in a complex world? Are there creative ways where the Church could or should influence the way the secular authorities exercise its power, authority, and function for our common life [many scholars tend to use ‘common good’]?

What does it mean today for a community to be restored when people of many nations continue to be dispersed and exiled from their own countries? See the scale of human displacement in our world today. It might feel as if Covid-19 has put a stop to life and activities, but nothing can be further from the truth!

Death on the dangerous high seas of the Mediterranean has continued unabated; the conflicts in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc., have not disappeared just because there is an invisible much more lethal ‘enemy’ lurking about! In fact, new conflicts have resumed in South Asia, the Caucasus, and near the Horn of Africa. Natural disasters, namely the massive earthquake in Turkey and the extensive flooding in The Philippines, still occur. As we were reminded by the annual Pray for Prisoners Week, those incarcerated both home and abroad continue to languish and made worse by the pandemic.

The fat sheep in the Old Testament are rejected for all their injustice – perhaps, that is fairly easy to interpret in terms of the injustices around the world today – the fat cats who continue to milk the socio-political and financial systems, including the billions of pounds that have apparently gone into a black hole with our government handing out contracts (apparently without the usual rigour of tendering and transparency) for the ‘world-beating’ Test-Track-Trace system!

Thankfully, we now witness investigative journalists as the new prophetic voice in place of a lame church, exposing deep-seated cronyism and potential corruption in our once-esteemed public office.

Will President-elect Biden bring some renewed hope in our democratically-deficit age? We could perhaps take heart that this man of strong Roman Catholic faith has persevered through family tragedies, and there is that probability that his compassion would undergird his actions and policies.

From the prophet Ezekiel, we have God whose kingship is ultimately involved in compassionate action. Because the earthly kings had failed, God is now portrayed as the **true king**. Not only that, but also as the **true shepherd** who personally seeks out his lost sheep, rescuing the scattered and returning them to the safety of good and secure pasture. It is not just for the relief of his people, but to *re-establish* justice for the whole earth!

Here is where the Gospel lesson comes into line with the Old Testament lesson. If the false shepherds in Ezekiel had failed to care for God’s vulnerable people, we might

call to mind that earlier thought about Christ, at the same time both victorious and humiliated.

Matthew 25:31-46

New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

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.’

It is our daily encounter and challenge: Do we just walk away when someone is in need? The Gospel passage [one that we have heard several times over and perhaps taken its meaning for granted] challenges us once again that it is to the lowest depths that the king himself is sinking into: **the king is present incognito in his humblest follower!**

The following quote from a respected New Testament scholar is instructive:

“It is in *any* brother/[sister] of Jesus, however insignificant, that Jesus himself is served, and it is *that* service which is therefore a criterion of judgment, as it indicates how one responds to Jesus himself.” (Dick France, *Matthew*, p.357)

While we have that image of God as shepherd – essentially a lowly job in ancient times – then moving on to the image of Christ among the very lowly [the poor and needy] in our midst, we cannot but return to that enduring question posed by Jesus – **“Who do you say that I am?”**

Those last verses from Ephesians 1:22-23 (indeed the entire first chapter of Paul’s epistle) would repay our close and careful reading and meditation:

²² And he [God] has put **all things** under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

What would all things mean for you, your family, your work, your situation, your church? Will God not only be our caring shepherd/pastor, but also a prophetic irritant?!

A last word from Alan Gaunt is timely for our current times:

*God, challenge the people of power,
the leaders of the nations;
challenge your world-wide Church;
and challenge us, each one,
to share your intolerance of injustice,
and move towards a world,
where our wealth and comfort
is never paid for
by the other people's poverty and pain.*

Amen.