

Christ the King Year A 2020

One of the oldest and best known images of Jesus is as a shepherd - indeed, as the *Good Shepherd* - the one who will lay down his life for his sheep.

In the prophecy of Ezekiel, it is the Lord God who describes himself in shepherding terms - a 'keeper' who will keep watch, keep the sheep fed, keep them safe; and a 'searcher' who will search for the lost, search for good pasture, search out the injured and those in need in the flock. And Israel's kings and appointed officials were expected to do exactly the same - keep and search. Unfortunately the majority of them fell far short of the expectations both of the people and of the Lord God. As a result, the flock has been scattered - it has been shipped out of Israel into exile in Babylon - and God, through Ezekiel, lays the blame for this disaster firmly at the feet of the king and his officials - those whom he is going to feed with justice. Israel's shepherds have made the slide into idolatry, taking the flock with them. The desolation and destruction of Jerusalem and the tragic exile in Babylon happened because the shepherds forgot

that the flock was not theirs; it belongs to the Lord, and the Lord has not forgotten his flock.

He promises them that he will bring the flock out of exile and that he will care for them - 'I will bring them out from the peoples . . . and I will feed them by the water courses . . . with good pasture'. And then he promises to raise another shepherd, a faithful king, in whom the promises made with David will be fulfilled. The first of these promises is fulfilled when King Cyrus allows Israel to return from exile (Isa.45), and the second by the coming of Jesus, the 'seed of David', Yahweh's servant. He is the one who will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats. We call this text the parable of the sheep and the goats, although it isn't really a parable, more a narrative description of the final judgement of 'all the nations'.

Matthew's description of this event makes for strange reading. On this Feast of Christ the King, we are given a graphic description of judgement, and those who are judged worthy to enter into eternal life are not those who are rich or powerful - not the privileged elite who, in our society are considered to be better or more important or more successful than the vast majority of us. No, those who are invited to join the heavenly

banquet where Christ is the generous host are those who did the simplest of things - they responded to human need. There is nothing in Matthew's story of the last judgement which is particularly religious, either in terms of need or response. The needs are very human; food, water, clothing, company - and the response is very human - you either respond as a member of the kingdom and become 'blessed of the Father', or you respond by turning away from the need and become accursed. The blessed are praised for the simplest of actions - and they are actions not just attitudes - not just saying something should be done, but doing something. There is no record here of great heroism, no stories of conquest, no great trials or suffering, no marvellous triumphs over disaster, no feats of imaginative daring. The requirements are simple and within the ability of all of us. No training is required, no academic qualifications are necessary. The actions of the blessed are the simple responses of those who pay attention to what is happening in the world around them, those who move to answer the needs which confront them. For Jesus, what happens in the world of the familiar has an eternal significance about it. Little acts of kindness, graciousness and

charity are grounds enough for welcome into the fullness of the kingdom.

Those who are blessed are amazed at this. They had not thought that they were doing anything special for Jesus. 'When did we see you?' they ask. They have simply responded with mercy to those in need. But Jesus says that every kindness done to a person in need, however lowly, is a kindness done to himself. You don't even have to know who he is!

Those who are cursed have brought that curse upon themselves because they failed to respond to need. They are not accused because of violent crimes or offences on a great scale, any more than the blessed were praised for heroic virtue. Rather, they are accursed because they failed to respond to human need. They saw what was needed, and walked away. The difference between being a human being and being human.

We can understand all this at a personal level - but we need also to apply it at a greater level. Multinational companies get away with tax avoidance - or should that be tax evasion - in developing countries where a little extra national income, wisely spent, could

make a tremendous difference to the lives of thousands of people. Dictators stash away millions whilst their people live in abject poverty. Friends of government ministers get lucrative contracts, whilst benefit for those in need are held or reduced. Our Lord, and the poor with whom he identifies, have much to teach us about the indifference and cruelty of those who accumulate for themselves at the expense of others.

Christ the King is in heaven, seated at the right hand of God the Father, but you and I are here among his people. Today's Feast of Christ the King challenges us to live out our calling as Christians by accepting our duties and responsibilities as Christians as completely as we can, not to curry favour or gain brownie points, but because that is what it means to be members of the Body of Christ, recognising our kinship with all those whom Christ calls 'the least of', his brothers and sisters, and therefore our brothers and sisters, too. BUT (having said all that) and it is a big BUT -

We have to note that only in Matthew's Gospel do we get this parable. So, if we accept that this story was in the public domain, as we say, why didn't the other evangelists use it? The answer

probably lies in the letters of Paul; you have to remember that Paul was writing before the Gospels were written. He, and those around him, preached the death and resurrection of our Lord. In ICor.15 we read 'Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day'. It is in this dead and resurrected Christ that Paul and his followers in the churches he founded put their total trust and faith. For them, faith, belief, was what mattered, not actions. So, why does Matthew include this parable, and the others leave it out? It is probably all down to local situations, to whom the evangelists were writing, to the conditions under which local Christians were living. What is important to these people here and now? Perhaps Matthew put faith in the risen Christ as understood?

I have been preaching for almost thirty years, and I still find it difficult to understand what these wonderful words mean for me, for you, for the world - but I do know that our Lord wants us to be seekers, carers, keepers - so that, at the end, we can be called 'blessed', and invited to the heavenly banquet. Amen