

Christ the King Witney Zoom 2020

Matthew 25: 31-46

Our first reading presents God as a shepherd who really cares for his sheep. Then our Gospel reading contains a dramatic image of a king separating people into two camps based on how they behave towards other people. The scene is the final judgement but not to be taken in too literal a sense. We need to focus on the meaning behind it.

In Jesus' day shepherds were commonplace. Maybe some of those listening to Jesus were shepherds, if not then they would've been used to seeing them.

The same can be said about kings. We might be struck by what a lot of kings there are in the Bible. Every city seemed to have a king and we're all familiar with King Herod from the Christmas story. Nowadays few countries have monarchs and some of those are beginning to wonder if they're such a good thing. In some ways a king has become something unusual, something historical, something rather quaint and outdated.

The same could be said about the title 'Lord'

So, when it comes to God, should we still be referring to him as Lord, or King, or even shepherd? What do these titles mean today? Would it be more appropriate to call him President or Prime Minister? We're making a mistake if we do. A president or prime minister must be elected and if they don't live up to our expectations, we can remove them from office and elect someone else.

Whereas a king, or a Lord, is someone we're stuck with, whether we like them or not. And that's the reality of our relationship with God. We don't choose God, he chooses us. Our choice is whether we relate to him or not. But for Christians, there's no alternative god to whom we might transfer allegiance. God's there, whether we like it or not. He's the source of goodness, grace and justice for this world.

Justice is one of the most profound longings of humanity. If there's no justice, then something is out of joint. It's hard to define and even harder to put into practice, but it's never stopped people seeking it, praying for it and working to find ways of doing it better. And justice doesn't simply mean punishing wickedness, it means bringing the world back into balance.

And so, for the last Sunday in the Church's year we've a vivid parable telling us what'll happen when justice is done, and the Son of Man comes in glory. Christ the King will separate the sheep from the goats. He'll welcome the sheep on his right hand and offer them the kingdom that's been prepared for them since the creation of the world.

In the Middle East sheep and goats graze together but need to be separated at night so goats, which are less hardy, can be kept warm. It's often difficult to tell them apart. They can be similar in colour, but one main difference is the sheep's tail hangs down and the goat's sticks up. But the reference to sheep and goats and to the shepherd who divides them up at the end of the grazing day is incidental to the main point of this parable.

There will be two kinds of people being judged, described respectively as 'sheep' and 'goats', the good guys and the bad guys. And how are the good and the bad guys to be distinguished from each other? It is obvious that both groups are very surprised at the criteria Jesus gives.

The sheep are clearly very surprised. This isn't what they expect to hear. It seems they hardly remember doing the loving things although they've done at least some of them. And certainly, they don't remember ever doing any of them for Jesus. "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"

Are they even more surprised at the answer they get? "Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me."

Then turning to the goats, Jesus condemns them for not doing any of the caring things and for not recognising Jesus in their brothers and sisters.

So, what's this story about for us?

The way we deal with others is the way we deal with God. If we don't listen to others, we're not likely to listen to God. If we're mean to others, we'll have a mean relationship with God.

If we only like people who obey us, we'll seek a puppet God. Our faith isn't one that's out of this world – our faith is reflected in our relationships with each other as well as with God. As God is in each person, though sometimes so hidden he's hard to find, we need to treat everyone with reverence and respect. There's no single person who doesn't have God hidden within, even though they may live in total denial of him. The tramp and the criminal have no less of God than the archbishop or saint.

So is the title of King an outdated title for Jesus? Jesus makes it quite clear in his parable that he has expectations of the people who wish to be in his kingdom so are these expectations still applicable to us?

Yes, if we want to be part of God's kingdom then we're to feed the hungry. A third of the world's population are starving so the hungry are not outdated. We're to welcome the stranger. There are refugees, driven out from their own countries to seek asylum in another. Strangers are not outdated. We're to care for the sick. Whole countries are affected by disease and

sickness, including our own. The sick are not outdated. We're to visit those in prison. The prisons of the world are full. Some people are prisoners in their own homes through mental illness or lack of mobility. All need compassion. Prisoners are not outdated. We're to clothe the naked. That's not just those who've no clothes but those who have been stripped of their reputation.

God says he will save his flock. He will seek the lost, bind the injured, strengthen the weak. We're to do the same. Nothing else will do.