

Feast of Christ the King – 23 November 2008

Ezekiel 34:11-16, Psalm 100, Matthew 25:31-46

Today is the feast of Christ the King. This is a feast-day, a day of celebration. In the last two weeks, Peter and Bronwyn have spoken about the theme of judgement, and of the end of an age.

In that context, today's readings tell us about God's goodness, love and faithfulness; about nurture, and deliverance and homecoming; some more about judgement; and about the coming of the kingdom. And quite a bit about sheep.

So, what does it mean to celebrate the sovereignty of Christ?

Psalm 100 tells us that we are to sing and shout with joy. How often do we do that? We often sing with joy here in our worship space. Do we shout with joy? Sometimes. I certainly recall great enthusiasm for, "Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia." And last week's liturgy included the words, "Come Lord Jesus!" with an exclamation mark! We are to be filled with joy because we are God's people. We need to give thanks and praise because, in the words of the psalm:

the LORD is good and his love endures forever;
his faithfulness continues through *all* generations.

This is more than can be said for even the most loved mortal king – that his love endures forever and his faithfulness continues through all generations – past, present, future – the great grandparents, the grandparents, the parents, the children, the grandchildren, the great-grandchildren. Imagine those images that you see when you stand between 2 mirrors – an endless line of people stretching away beyond our ability to see. God's goodness, love and faithfulness are *immeasurably* beyond our ability to see and to really comprehend. Some concrete imagery helps us to understand a little.

Sheep

Ezekiel talks about God's people as being like his sheep, of belonging to him, of being "the sheep of his pasture." He speaks of God gathering the scattered sheep, tending the weak and injured, and bringing them back to good pastures. Ezekiel was a prophet of the time of exile in Babylon, so to be gathered and taken back to the good pasture on the mountains of Israel meant more than love and nurture; it also spoke of God's continuing faithfulness and love, of deliverance and homecoming. To be God's sheep was and is to be loved, to be sought and delivered from harm, to be nurtured and finally to be brought home.

There is also a sombre note of judgement in Ezekiel. The Lord shepherds with justice. The fat and the sleek are to be destroyed – not for being fat and sleek, but because they became like that by pushing aside the weaker sheep. They took more than their share, and left their brothers and sisters with less. That was the judgement against them. Judgement begins not with the decisions of the judge, but with the

decisions of those who will be judged. The judge brings justice or mercy to the judged in response to their decisions, their actions, their intentions and their attitudes of defiance or repentance. It's a very sobering thought.

Judgement - shepherd

Let's talk a little about judgement – not always a popular topic these days. I don't know very much about sheep but I have seen the judgement of a shepherd in action. We once lived next to someone who had quite a few sheep, and when the young lambs began to explore they could easily pop through the fence into the next paddock. This didn't matter because they very quickly returned, not wanting to be away from their mothers for more than a few minutes. By the time they were more independent, they were also too big to fit through the fence . . . except for one little chap. He had both intelligence and initiative. He was able to squeeze and wriggle through the smallest spaces and eat the grass that was being grown for others.

And so the shepherd passed judgement. "Smart little rascal," he said. "I think we'll have to hang *him* up in the freezer!" . . . This shepherd valued his sheep but he didn't fail to act when the actions of one sheep could mean suffering for the others.

That was the judgement of the shepherd.

Judgement - Christ

Matthew speaks of the judgement of Christ. When the Son of Man comes in his glory, he will judge the nations as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. In this case the sheep represent those who served the Lord. The goats, wonderful animals though they are in real life, here represent those who not only failed to serve, but failed to see the need and the opportunity to serve. They failed to see Christ in the face of the stranger and the needy.

The judgement of Christ, like the judgement of the shepherd, may appear harsh, but a failure to judge those who do wrong or who fail to do right could mean that there is no regard for the greater good, no justice for those who are called "the least of these."

Jesus identifies particularly with those who are least regarded. He doesn't just say, "You fed or clothed those I care about." He said, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for **I** was hungry and you gave me food, **I** was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, . . ." and so on. We are not asked to serve others in order to win favour with Christ; we are asked to serve Christ in others.



One Sunday a few months ago, the worshippers at a church in north Wales arrived to find this man sitting in the porch of the church. He settled on a pew in the church surrounded by syringes and began drinking from a can of beer. No-one spoke to him or offered him any help.

He then took off his wig revealing his true identity as their minister, the Rev Derek Digby. He has done this before in previous parishes. Sometimes people asked him into the church, or offered him food or money. They rarely recognised him. If they had recognised him, would they have acted differently?



If we recognised Christ in the least of those we meet, how would we act? I know of many occasions when I have failed to see Christ in the difficult, the dirty, the needy and the annoying, even on occasion in those I love dearly. Often my failures were needed words of encouragement that I failed to utter, or sharp thoughtless words that could not be recalled. It is all too easy to put ourselves first, to be the goat instead of the sheep. Each day we must decide over and over again whether or not to be one of God's sheep. Will you be a sheep today? Will I?

Identity and belonging

These two images of shepherd and king, of sheep and inheritors of the kingdom, invite us to consider who we are and where we belong. The shepherd and the king both have a duty and a responsibility for those in their care. The sheep have their place in the flock and belong to the shepherd. The people have their place in the kingdom and belong to the king. They are both dependent - for their nurture, their safety, their total well being.

Psalm 100 says “we are the sheep of *his* pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise.” Ezekiel tells of how the Good Shepherd, the Lord God, brings the scattered sheep home to the rich pastures - home to *his* pastures, where they belong.

But we are not just the sheep of his pastures, we have a place in God's kingdom and we belong to Christ the King.

Matthew says “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

Conclusion

As a child I was taught that at my baptism, I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven. This is who we are and where we belong. We have an eternal home with Christ the King, a place prepared for us from the foundation of the world. We can sing and shout our joy that Christ is our King.