



Sermon
23/11/14

Christ the King

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

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Today is the last Sunday of the Church year, the celebration of Christ the King. It is a day to focus on the kingship of Jesus.

We heard the reading from Ezekiel. It was addressed to the people of Israel during the Exile in Babylon. God said that he will bring his people back to their land. He would rule over them. He would tend them and care for them. He will be a good shepherd. In the Old Testament rulers were often likened to shepherds caring for their flocks and leading them. So here God said to his people he be a good ruler over them.

The appointed reading omitted three verses from the Old Testament reading:

¹⁷ "As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats. ¹⁸ Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? ¹⁹ Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet?"

It is a basic function of kings to judge. That is part of rulership. God would judge between one sheep and another. He would judge between rams and goats. He would judge those sheep or goats which bully others and are greedy - which spoil food and water for the others.

As an aside we need to be careful in our dealings with each other, that we are not like these sheep which are criticised by God here. Are we bullying our fellow Christians. Are we demanding our own way or spoiling things for others? One could extend the metaphor to the possibility of sheep spoiling the food of others in terms of misinterpreting scripture so the word is no longer feeding them. Francis Schaeffer's wife, Edith, told a story of Japanese Prisoners of War being fed good food with castor oil added. The castor oil made the food pass through the gut too quickly for the nutrients to be absorbed so the men starved while eating food! In the same way, false interpretation of scripture can rob us of its value. Because we don't receive it with faith we fail to gain nourishment. We need to be watchful neither to oppress our fellow Christian nor to rob the word of God of its value by holding or teaching unbelief.

Now, Jesus knew his Bible. This is the only place where judging between sheep and goats is mentioned. It is inconceivable that he would not have been thinking of this when he spoke of the sheep and the goats to his disciples.

The promise of God through Ezekiel to his people is that he would place over them a ruler descended from David to shepherd them. Yahweh will be their God and the Messiah their prince. Jesus is, of course, that ruler, descended from David, their shepherd and prince.

Matthew

In the last few weeks we have thought about the Parable of the Ten Virgins and the Parable of the Talents. They are part of this wider set of teaching on the last days. We learnt of the need to be watchful and responsible. Here Jesus tells of justice being done. He claims to be the Messiah, the fulfilment of the Ezekiel passage.

He tells us that when he returns in glory he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. He will be recognised as the King. He will exercise the right and duty of a king to judge. All nations will be called to accord.

The term "the nations" was the standard Jewish expression for the Gentiles. So he calls the gentiles - the non-Jewish peoples - to account for their treatment of his people. How had they responded to need in the least of his brothers?

How had they responded to the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned, the lonely stranger? As much as they did it to them, they did it to him.

Jesus as king will judge. He has the right to judge all people of the world. He has the right to judge all people of all time. He will determine the eternal destination of sinner and of saint. Some will have shown their positive response to him by their positive response to his disciples. Others will have shown their rejection of him by their rejection of his disciples.

This is not a parable. A parable is a story to illustrate a point. This is a statement of future events with a metaphor used in the middle of it. Hence people are compared to sheep and goats. Middle-Eastern sheep are very like goats in appearance. Yet a shepherd needs to treat them differently. Sheep are able to keep warm on a cool night. Goats suffer from the cold and need to be herded together to keep warm.

When we were in Tanzania, we were told the easy way to tell them apart is their tails. Goats lift their tails up straight – sheep cannot do that. Apart from that they look very much alike. The two types of people look alike too. But there are indicators which show what nature lies within them. Their actions show their heart attitude.

This is not a teaching saying Jesus' followers must care for the needy. It is true that other parts of the gospels and epistles do teach us that – for instance: Mt 22:37-40 ("Love your neighbour as yourself") and Galatians 2:10 (The Council of Jerusalem asked the Gentile Christians "... to continue to remember the poor.") Those passages do urge us to have a concern for the needy around us. But that is not the purpose of this passage.

We can say that because Jesus said the condition will be how they have treated "one of the least of these brothers of mine." It does violence to the text to claim this is any needy person. It is not, it is those who are in relationship with Jesus.

Now some interpreters understand him to mean the Jews because there is a very similar prophecy in Joel, where the Gentile nations are gathered for judgment over how they have treated Israel.

Joel 3:1-3 "In those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, ² I will gather all nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. There I will enter into judgment against them concerning my inheritance, my people Israel, for they scattered my people among the nations and divided up my land. They cast lots for my people and traded boys for prostitutes; they sold girls for wine that they might drink.

On the other hand it could mean Christian disciples. Jesus has already used the same expression, earlier in Matthew's gospel:

Matthew 10:40 & 42 "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me."

⁴² "And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."

There he was talking of disciples as "one of the least of these." He was saying how disciples of Christ are treated is extraordinarily powerful in terms of consequence. God is in Christ, Christ is in Christians, bless or curse a Christian and you are blessing or cursing God.

In Luke's gospel he is recorded as defining his brothers as "... those who hear God's word and put it into practice."¹ Again, he means his disciples.

So which is it – the Jews or the Disciples? Both are compelling arguments. I will leave you to do your own thinking about the question. Looking at today's theme the answer doesn't matter – either way Christ is King judging the nations.

Ephesians

As we turn over to Ephesians, Paul tells us that when Christ was raised from the dead, he was raised to be seated next to God the Father in heavenly places, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title.

That means he is above all human authority structures. All things have been placed under his feet. A true summary would be 'Christ is King of kings and King over everything.'

But Paul also says, that Christ was appointed as head over everything **for the Church**. The Church is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

The Revd Dr Peter Carrell writes:

"God wants the church to be protected and provided for by the one who is in charge of everything. And why not, because the church is not some group outside the being of God in Christ, mercifully and unexpectedly

¹ Luke 8:21

included in the Godhead. No! The church is Christ the King's 'body, the fullness of him who fills all in all'. Christ takes care of his body."²

That makes sense of Jesus statement: "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me."

We are in Christ; we are grafted into him when we are born again. "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."³ The Christian's life is Christ. We are not distant followers, we are indwelt by the Spirit of our God.

So, Church, do you have a big enough view of Christ? He is raised above all authority and power of earth. He is more powerful than Obama, Xi Jinping, Putin or the combined G20 Heads of Government. He is far above them all.

The other question is do we have a big enough and bold enough vision of who we are in Christ? We are incorporated into this supreme ruler. We are his expression on earth. We are given delegated authority by him. The Church is far more than a place for a quiet reflection and a free cup of tea! We, the Church, are his fullness! We are his delight and purpose.

We need then to pray with Paul that: the eyes of [our hearts] may be enlightened in order that [we] may know the hope to which he has called [us], the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe."⁴

² <http://preachingdownunder.blogspot.co.nz/> Posting for 23/11/14

³ Galatians 2:20

⁴ Ephesians 1:18-19