

Readings for the Feast of Christ the King

26th November 2023

First Reading: Ezekiel 34:11-16,20-24

Thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. 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. 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. 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. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. 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.

Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

Second Reading: Ephesians 1:15-23

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Gospel: St Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus said to his disciples: '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. 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, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 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; 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, 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." 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? 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?" 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, you did it to me.” 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; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 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.” 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?” 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.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

A Reflection for the Feast of Christ the King

Some years ago now, there was a fashion in some Christian circles to wear a wristband or bracelet with the letters WWJD on it. Perhaps you remember it. Perhaps you wore one. I don't think they've gone out of fashion but I haven't seen many recently – maybe I move in different circles these days. The letters, WWJD, stood for ‘What would Jesus do?’, and the wristband was intended to serve as a reminder that we are the hands and feet of Jesus in the world today and that our words and actions should reflect those of Jesus in the different circumstances we find ourselves in.

It is a sobering thought for us as Christians that, in today's world, people see Jesus through his followers. But, as I've mentioned before, we, his followers, are just as likely as most people, when faced with difficult situations around us or in the world at large, to follow what is sometimes referred to as the ‘proximity factor’: we are more likely to speak out or act on behalf of someone else, the closer our relationship with them. It's a case of ‘family first’; the reality is that we are much less likely to speak out or act on behalf of those living far away, those we don't know, even if their suffering is extreme.

In today's Gospel, a passage often referred to as ‘the sheep and the goats’, Jesus challenges and redefines who we should regard as ‘family’. Jesus, who himself bridges earth and heaven, human and divine as ‘son of Man’ and ‘son of God’, identifies the family he and we should be prepared to take action for as the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner. Our relationships, and therefore the action we should be prepared to take, is based on need. It is those who heed this that he says will inherit the kingdom prepared by God.

We read something similar in today's passage from Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a prophet and was among those from Judah who went into exile in Babylon early in the 6th century BCE. In this section of his writings, he give words of hope to the exiles far from home. In today's passage, we hear of the shepherd king who, unlike all the human kings whose failures have led them into exile, will seek the scattered sheep and feed them. This shepherd will seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. We hear echoes here of Jesus' words in John's Gospel: ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep’ (John 10:11).

Jesus is the descendent of King David, the one long promised who will save God's people, and here at the end of today's passage in Ezekiel we hear that foretold: ‘I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them...and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, shall be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them.

Bringing these passages from Ezekiel and Matthew together, we see that God raised up Jesus to be king over his people, but a different type of king. Jesus is a shepherd king who cares for and leads the flock of his people, and calls

his people to do the same for others. Matthew was writing to a young Christian community who would have been expecting Jesus' imminent return. However, Matthew tries to make clear that the human Jesus is gone, he has returned to heaven. But his people can continue to experience his presence in a new way through other people. He says: 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Whenever we help others, it is Jesus we are helping.

WWJD: 'What would Jesus do?' We need to be careful not to view other people, and especially those in need, as objects to be 'done to' in order that we may earn our way to heaven. The family relationship is vital; we are on an equal footing with those we perceive to be in some kind of need. So perhaps the question we should ask ourselves is 'Do I recognise Jesus in you?' ... and, if not, why not? For we are all created in God's image.

Some of the WWJD wrist bands had a second set of letters – HWLF: 'He would love first'. We all recognise that Jesus commanded us to love the Lord our God and then 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' (There's that family relationship again!) In today's passage from Ephesians, Paul starts by praising them for living out this love.

It seems that Jesus' instruction is clear: if we want to be part of Jesus' family and part of God's kingdom, we need to do these things. We need to feed the hungry, give the thirsty something to drink, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the prisoner. That's quite a thought – and there are real consequences for inaction. We can think of the Mother Teresa's of this world and her work in the slums of Calcutta; or Dorothy Day, the American social activist who founded the Catholic Worker Movement that combined direct help for the poor with non-violent campaigning on their behalf; or Martin Luther King Jr and his part in the struggle for American civil rights. But, in reality, few people dedicate their lives to such things. To do so is a radical choice that not many are willing to make, or indeed are capable of living out. Does that mean we are all condemned? I hope not and I think that is not what Jesus is saying.

Let's go back to that word 'love' and to the Gospel passage. The challenge here is attitude. Those rewarded in this story of the sheep and the goats are those whose actions were done without expectation of reward: 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?...' Rather than having a tick-list of things to be done to get into God's kingdom, they demonstrated the outworking of a heart that has embraced God's love and grace and can therefore do no other. They knew they were loved by God and they lived out that love to others. As we come to the end of one church year and, next week, start a new one, perhaps this is an opportunity to recommit to loving people as Jesus does. And to recommitting again when we fail, as we all do, even Mother Teresa, rather than giving up.

As well as the challenge, there's also an important reassurance in this Gospel story ... and we need both. There are times in our lives when we will be the lost, the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger. At those times, Jesus the shepherd king, will search for us through his people. It is a two-way process.

Thomas Merton, the American monk, theologian and writer, wrote: 'Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. That is not our business and, in fact, it is nobody's business. What we are asked to do is love, and this love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbours worthy.'