

Sunday 26th November 2017

Christ the King

The Sunday next before Advent



Collect

Eternal Father, whose Son Jesus Christ ascended to the throne of heaven that he might rule over all things as Lord and King: keep the Church in the unity of the Spirit and in the bond of peace, and bring the whole created order to worship at his feet; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 English Standard Version (ESV)

The Lord GOD Will Seek Them Out

¹¹ “For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹² As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³ And 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 ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. ¹⁴ I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. ¹⁶ 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, and the fat and the strong I will destroy.[a] I will feed them in justice.

²⁰ “Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹ Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, ²² I will rescue[b] my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. ²³ And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴ And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the Lord; I have spoken.

Footnotes: a. Septuagint, Syriac, Vulgate *I will watch over*. b. or *save*.

COMMENT: The prophet Ezekiel played a significant role in Israel’s religious history, if for no other reason than that, like Jeremiah, he lived through the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians, the destruction of the temple and the exile of the greater number of Israel’s leading citizens. Included in this exile were the priestly families, of whom Ezekiel was a

member. He may not have witnessed the actual sack of Jerusalem in 587-586 BC because he had already been deported with King Jehoiachin ten years earlier. Rather, he was a witness from afar, which may well account for the gloomy predictions of judgment and visions of destruction articulated in his prophecies. In fact, some modern analysts of Ezekiel's life and ministry have speculated that he may have suffered from schizophrenia. When Jerusalem finally did fall to the Babylonians, Ezekiel experienced a strange reversal of his prophetic insight. In the latter segment of his work, he expressed a prophetic hope which he did not have in his earlier pronouncements. Whereas words of doom against Judah and Jerusalem generally fill the early chapters of the book (chapters 1-24) and oracles against foreign nations are proclaimed in chapters 25-32, the concluding segment (chapters 33-48) contains promises of the eventual restoration of the LORD's people and a blueprint for a reconstruction of the worship of the LORD. In the interim, Ezekiel promises that the LORD will become as a shepherd seeking his wandering flock, leading them to a suitable pasture and tending to the wounded and the weak (verses 11-16). Ezekiel 34:13-16 can be read as an allegory of The LORD's loving kindness and mercy. Jesus may have seen his ministry in this light of this passage, and certainly, the apostolic church recognised him as the promised Messiah. Compare John 10:1-18 to see how much this was so. The Jewish interpretation of the passage recognizes the promise of a messianic leader of God's people, but differs as to the identity of Jesus in this role.

Matthew 25:31-46 English Standard Version (ESV)

The Final Judgment

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers,[a] you did it to me.’ ⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Footnote: a. or *brothers and sisters*.

COMMENT: This parable tells us that the reign of Christ will begin with a final judgment. But it is a parable, a story told to persuade people on how to live as they prepare for that inevitable experience, not a description of what the event will be like. The story has an eschatological and a messianic emphasis set in place by its very first clause, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all his angels with him” In verses 31 and 32 there are two images of the judgment. The first envisages a typical a royal court where the monarch is surrounded by courtiers and the whole populace is gathered before the throne waiting for a critical decision. The second describes the much humbler scene of a shepherd at the end of a day separating sheep from goats as they enter the fold for the night. The task was an easy one, for in the Middle East sheep are generally white and goats black. The monarch’s task might not be so easy, for the character of human beings is much more complex. The story does simplify the basis on which the judgment is made. It has to do with how each person responds to everyday opportunities to help others in need. The length and detail with which this poignant emphasis is described assures even the hasty reader that this is what the story means. The reign of Christ and God’s eternal judgment are going on right now with each decision and action we take. How we live today has eternal consequences. We are to witness to the reign of Christ in the way we serve him in faithfulness, kindness and love to our neighbours in need. Yet this parable is not a simple story offering polite moral counsel seeking for ethical behaviour to create a kinder, gentler, self-satisfied society. Coming as it does immediately before the Passion story, this parable connects our time in history and the time of Jesus as an historical person with the reality of eschatological judgment at the end of time. The way this parable describes how the faithful are to live is the way Jesus lived “as one that served.” As he turned to the all-important conclusion of his gospel, Matthew was saying that in Jesus the Messiah the divine judgment which Israel has anticipated for so long had arrived. The gospel speaks across the millennia with the same clarion call of judgment: the crucified and risen Jesus, the ever present ‘God with us,’ is now deciding who will have a part in the eternal reign of love fulfilled in God’s creation.

Psalm 95 *Venite, exultemus* Grail Psalter

℟ O that today you would listen to his voice! Harden not your hearts.

¹ Come, ring out our joy to the Lord;
hail the rock who saves us.

² Let us come before him, giving thanks,
with songs let us hail the Lord. ℟

³ A mighty God is the Lord,
a great king above all gods.

⁴ In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his.

⁵ To him belongs the sea, for he made it
and the dry land shaped by his hands. ℟

⁶ Come in; let us bow and bend low;
let us kneel before the God who made us

⁷ for he is our God and we
the people who belong to his pasture,
the flock that is led by his hand. ℟

**Glory be to the Father, and to the Son :
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be :
world without end. Amen.**

COMMENT: This is one of series of psalms which may also have been sung by pilgrims as they entered the temple precincts. This excerpt praises and thanks the LORD as Creator and Sovereign of the universe. There is, however, a note of henotheism in verse 3 where the LORD is not only described as a great God, but the king over all other gods. This represents a theological position that contrasts Israel's god with the gods of other nations, although elevated above such other gods as the Canaanite Baal, the Moabite Chemosh and the Ammonite Molech. Verse 6 contains an interesting reference to kneeling in prayer. This indicates that the procession of worshipers praising the LORD had already entered the temple where each had reached his appointed station for worship. The Jews adopted several positions for prayer including prostration and kneeling. Prostration symbolized obeisance; kneeling was adopted for petition. The latter succeeded the former suggesting that one changed positions because there was something to see. Today, television often shows Jewish worshipers standing before the Western Wall of the Temple to pray. For Christians, there is no absolutely correct position for prayer. We may approach God in positions that suit the moment. The important thing is to be reverent in what we are doing. Verse 7 repeats the familiar metaphor of the LORD as shepherd of Israel found in other psalms and prophets like Ezekiel. That is why it became a familiar metaphor for Jesus.

Short Preface 1

And now we give you thanks because you anointed Jesus Christ, your only Son, as priest and King. Crowned with thorns, he offered his life upon the cross, that he might draw all people into that kingdom where he now reigns in glory.

Short Preface 2

And now we give you thanks because you anointed Jesus Christ, your only Son, as the eternal priest and King of all. As a priest he offered up his life on the cross, that by his one sacrifice he might present to you an eternal kingdom; a kingdom of truth and life; a kingdom of justice, love and peace.

Post Communion

Stir up, O Lord, the wills of your faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may by you be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

The Blessing

Christ our King make you faithful and strong to do his will, that you may reign with him in glory; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you, and remain with you always. **Amen.**