

20th November 2005

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Readings:

- Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
- Psalm 100, page 326
- Ephesians 1: 15-23
- Matthew 25: 31-46

Sunday 20th November 2005 - Christ the King

We come to this last Sunday of the liturgical year! We celebrate "Christ the King".

But this offers a very masculine image when so many monarchs and world leaders are women. Possibly the alternative title, "The Reign of Christ" is more appropriate.

Even the title "Christ the King" is a little muddled because Christ is the Greek translation of Messiah, which is Hebrew for "the anointed one" — the one anointed to be king and shepherd of God's people.

So maybe "The reign (or rule) of Christ" is the better title because it tells us that we are to reflect not just on a kingly Jesus but on what his reign or rule might mean for us.

With the anointing of the ancient rulers of Israel was the belief that the ruler would be a shepherd and representative of God the great shepherd and that the people would be his sheep — his flock.

Psalm 100 (our psalm today) puts it this way
"The Lord himself is God,
he has made us and we are his,
we are his people and the sheep of his pasture."

(Psalms 93, 95 - 99 are kingship psalms with psalms 100 and 101 adding some interpretations of them.)

The hymn version says "he is our maker, we are all his creatures,"
"people he fashioned, sheep he leads to pasture"

The psalms reveal a great awareness of dependence and gratitude!

We have often traced the shepherd/ruler theme back to these psalms and to the ancient King David the shepherd boy and king who was believed to have written them. There are other references such as today's reading from Ezekiel as well as others in Jeremiah and Isaiah.

But as I react about the Shepherd/Ruler tradition I discovered that it went back further to Hammurabi, King of Babylon one thousand years earlier. I discovered that the tradition was evident in other Middle Eastern cultures in Egypt.

Lorenz Durr collected statements about shepherds in ancient oriental writings. He says:

"The false shepherds and their punishment.. 34:1-10

Ezekiel does not employ a new image, but a very old one, to reveal the change to a new mode of action on the part of Yahweh. The representation of ruler and subject by means of the image of shepherd and flock is well known through all the ancient East. At the beginning of his celebrated laws, Hammurabi already describes himself as the "shepherd of men", the "supplier of pasture and water", who has been appointed "to destroy the ruthless and wicked and to prevent the weak from being robbed of his just rights by the strong". The same note is struck in royal inscriptions down to Merodach BaladanII (c.710), who expresses consciousness of his duty as a shepherd to collect those who are scattered. The oldest of the Egyptian royal hymns also speaks of the duty of earnest love for the king, the shepherd, through whom his subjects live and breathe. Alongside power, the ancient oriental ideal of kingship includes the protection the true shepherd gives to his flock, by leading the needy to pasture, providing food and drink, and establishing pasturages and places of safety.(1)"

(1) Cf. the painstaking collection of statements about shepherds in ancient oriental royal writings by Lorenz Durr.

Incidentally, Hammurabi was the King of Babylon for 42 years. (modern day Iraq) How much more the leaders there need to destroy the ruthless and wicked and prevent the weak from being robbed by the strong of their rights today — and not only there!

Getting back to Ezekiel — he wrote this passage about God shepherding his people after they had been taken into captivity in (of all places) Babylon. So it is a message of hope in an extremely desperate time!

Also, we have omitted some of the best bits!

verse 10

Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.

verses 17-19

As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats.

18 Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet?

19 And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?

Which point out not only the failure of the rulers as shepherds, but also the greed and destruction of the sheep/ their people.

The issues for Ezekiel are

1. the unity of the people who have been scattered. True leadership is about the unity of the people.
2. Seeking the lost
3. Bringing back the strayed
4. Binding up the injured
5. Strengthening the weak.
6. Dealing with the fat and the strong

I don't have the answer but the question is...

How do we see this happening in

- our own society?

- our own family
- our own church

The task is very much one of Pastoral Care.

So now we turn to the image of the sorting out of the flock in Jesus' words to his *disciples*. — this was the last of Jesus' teaching in Matthew's Gospel!

We find it is like a farewell address about being ready for the Son of Man to come in his glory — the end of the age!

and the judgement is about sorting the sheep from the goats...

sheep to the right — sheep were more valuable than goats in Jesus' day and so on the right are those welcomed into the kingdom because they are the ones who have cared — for others and therefore for the Lord by

- feeding the hungry
- giving drink to the thirsty
- welcoming the stranger
- clothing the naked
- caring for the sick
- and**
- visiting the prisoner

[Remember Nguyen Tuong Van, at least we can pray]

Now, this is often seen in very general terms *BUT* Jesus is addressing his *disciples* and in verse 40 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."

Now, traditionally in Matthew's gospel "members of my family" refers to the disciples — so I have to ask "Is Jesus in his last words telling his disciples to care for each other?"

It's worth noting that as he goes to his cross where he is abandoned by his followers — it is almost like he is saying you cannot do this for me now, but you can do it for me in caring for each other. It is about being the body of Christ for each other and therefore for the world.

As we celebrate "The reign of Christ" we are called to reflect on the way in which Christ rules in our lives.