

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Christ the King, Year A, 26 November 2023
Reverend Martin Johnson

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

Well, if you wanted to know what the reign of Christ looks like, our readings today cover all bases.

This sovereign is – and I quote:

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 yet this sovereign, as we heard this morning from the prophet Ezekiel, also says of himself: *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.*

And if this seems too large a stretch – from the cosmic to the sheepfold, this sovereign is also hungry, thirsty, and sick, imprisoned, lonely, and naked. This is a sovereign who is completely at one with the most marginalised, those who are most in need.

Our initial reaction to the gospel passage we heard this morning is usually a simple one. Jesus the shepherd modelled on the ancient Jewish Davidic idea of the King as shepherd separates the sheep from the goats based on whether they have cared for the poor; and we ponder which one we might be. Of course, that simply depends on which side of the aisle you are sitting on. No, the real question we need to ask is, who are the marginalised? This is a reading that is far more than just the division of two types of ruminants! I have it on good authority that sheep's tails point down, whilst goat's point up. In first century Judea, sheep and goats were almost indistinguishable. There are indeed three groups here - the sheep, the goats, and those folk who Jesus describes as 'the least of these who are members of my family.' In which group are we?

In many varied ways the Church has been pushed to the margins of our society. We rarely have a voice it seems and when we do make the news it is usually for the wrong reasons. And so, at times we may be tempted to despair; we see smaller, older, congregations, fewer vocations, less resources, and ageing infrastructure. So, I ask you again in which group are we?

The Lectionary is a wonderful thing, and very much a part of the way that we hear the scriptures here at St Philip's; but we can become complacent in our reading of scriptures, and if we rely simply on hearing the 'Liturgy of the word', we can lose something of that all-important element... that of context. Early on in Matthew's gospel in the Beatitudes, Jesus reminds us that Blessed are the poor. Matthew never records Jesus referring to his brothers or sisters as anyone other than those who do the will of God by becoming his followers. And you will recall Jesus rather radically proposing that his new family are the disciples gathered around him, which of course includes women. Jesus is clear that to follow him means to be homeless; when a lawyer wants to follow him, Jesus replies: Foxes have dens, and the birds in the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.

I'm not suggesting that anytime soon many of you will find yourself: hungry, thirsty, and sick, imprisoned, lonely, and naked, I hope not anyway. But it is not too long a bow to suggest that we can replace those words with others that remind us not of authority, or wealth, or strength in numbers, but in weakness, poverty, uncertainty, and vulnerability. To follow Jesus means to risk all these things. It means to risk being hungry, thirsty, naked, as stranger, sick and in prison. This would not have been hard to imagine for many Christians in many parts of the world throughout history. Indeed, it is perhaps only in the western Church that might have thought of themselves as sheep. The Church was *the* provider of welfare and a real force in the community for good. No bad thing, may it remain that way. But clearly, we are not in any way superior, doling out largesse to the great unwashed, we are not. Which does suggest a rather different model for mission, doesn't it. We are not presenting ourselves as the strong with resources to help the weak, but we come as the weak ready to receive from those to whom we have been

sent. This is what Jesus tells the disciples when he sends them out ahead of him. This is risky and it raises big questions too about the status of those who perhaps we might not readily identify as being one of us, but have responded to Christ in being the 'sheep.'

It is a great truth that Christianity is at its most powerful when it is at the margins, the periphery, not the centre of power. This is the kind of community we are a part of and the kind of sovereign to whom we owe allegiance. He might not be the kind of King we might readily recognise; it might not be the kind of Church we are familiar with, but this is where we as a Church in our tradition are being called. A rediscovery of our calling and our place in the community.

We will have to consider how we might do things with more simplicity, how we might better use our resources, how we might encourage those who are orbiting the Church to support us. It is yet another reminder to us, as if we needed it, that we cannot and must not be quick to judge who is in, and who is not. It is not just about 'who is one of us,' but those who respond to us because of our commitment, because of our faith.

I for one am not prepared to give up on this wonderful tradition. At its heart is a Eucharistic spirituality that defies any attempt to create division, and long may it be the source and summit of all that is done in this place. Amen.