

## CHRIST THE KING – Sunday 22 November 2020

### 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.

### Psalm 95

- 1 O come, let us sing to the Lord; ♦  
let us heartily rejoice in the rock of our salvation.
- 2 Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving ♦  
and be glad in him with psalms.
- 3 For the Lord is a great God ♦  
and a great king above all gods.
- 4 In his hand are the depths of the earth ♦  
and the heights of the mountains are his also.
- 5 The sea is his, for he made it, ♦  
and his hands have moulded the dry land.
- 6 Come, let us worship and bow down ♦  
and kneel before the Lord our Maker.
- 7 For he is our God; ♦  
we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.

### Ephesians 1.15-23

15 I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason <sup>16</sup>I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. <sup>17</sup>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, <sup>18</sup>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, <sup>19</sup>and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. <sup>20</sup>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, <sup>21</sup>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. <sup>22</sup>And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, <sup>23</sup>which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

### Matthew 25.31-46

31 '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. <sup>32</sup>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, <sup>33</sup>and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. <sup>34</sup>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; <sup>35</sup>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, <sup>36</sup>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.” <sup>37</sup>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? <sup>38</sup>And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup>And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” <sup>40</sup>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.” <sup>41</sup>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; <sup>42</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup>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.” <sup>44</sup>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?” <sup>45</sup>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.” <sup>46</sup>And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

### **Reflection by Peter**

Of course, if you talk to any goat-owner they will defend their animals to the hilt, but there is no getting away from the fact that the popular imagination sees sheep (and specially lambs) as cuddly and cute and goats as somehow a bit disreputable. We can even agree that there is no scientific basis for this, but yet it remains lodged in the collective consciousness. Where does it come from? Well, just possibly all that prejudice against goats may stem from Jesus’ famous tale that we have just heard. This story appears only once in the Gospels, in the final section of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew, immediately before his passion, death and resurrection. It is familiar, powerful, full of memorable detail – but, arguably its most indelible legacy is the stereotypical view of sheep and goats that has imprinted itself on human imagination! If that is the case, then we might conclude that this is a bit of a failure on Jesus’ part, for surely this is not what he wanted us to remember....

This leads us straight to another distortion. For many, this story is a rather awful warning of the end that is likely to await us. Come the end of time, there are two possible outcomes, one good, one bad. No matter how hard we try, we can’t rid ourselves of the nagging anxiety that we shall find ourselves in the wrong queue. So it is that, once again, the popular imagination has remembered this story as one of judgment and punishment, heaven or hell, a good end, or a bad one. And, because most, if not all of us, can readily admit to failings in our readiness to take up prison visiting, or tending to street people, or feeding the hungry before looking after ourselves, we conclude that the scales seem to be firmly weighted in the wrong direction.

But, just like the poor goats who have had to live with an undeserved reputation, so we have fallen into a trap of our own making. Jesus does not tell this story in order to make us feel guilty and nervous about our possible end. Jesus is never interested in threatening or alarming his hearers: what he wants us to understand is what God is like. God, Jesus tells us, is the one who has lifted up the lowly and fed the hungry with good things (as Mary’s song in Luke’s Gospel puts it). If we are to feel at home in God’s kingdom, then we too must delight in putting the needs of others before our own, taking the opportunities we have to share our food with others; seeing when we can sacrifice some of our own freedom to spend time with the housebound or those in prison – and not because these are the kinds of things that will earn us brownie points, so that we stand a chance of having enough of a credit balance when we stand at the pearly gates, but because becoming more like the God who loves us is part of being able to feel at home in the Father’s kingdom.

Now, while we're on the subject of getting things wrong we might as well turn to kings and kingdoms. It is something of a miracle that our own royal family has not only survived the upheavals of history, but found a way of representing the very best of ourselves to us. This cannot be taken for granted: we have only to think of the challenges facing the Thai monarchy at the moment, or the constant bubble of scandal that seems to be part of daily life for the Queen and her family. With the prevailing distrust of institutions and authorities, monarchy is not seen generally as a good thing. This Sunday, the last of the church year before Advent, is the feast of Christ the King. Given the decline of the churches, falling attendance, a growing anxiety about relevance, such a feast may be read as one more sign of decay. How can we celebrate Christ as a king, when we associate monarchy with privilege and sovereign power over others?

Once again, we have to look to Jesus and listen carefully. We do acknowledge Jesus as king – but not like earthly kings. In the words of the hymn, Jesus is 'the King of love'. On trial before Pilate he says, "I would have no power unless it were given me from above." He does have power, but it is the power of love, of self-giving, and utter commitment to the Father in whose name he comes to us. This is where our own Queen is such an encouragement and example. At huge personal cost, she has dedicated herself wholly to the service of this country and is surely to be counted among the sheep of Jesus' story.

And where does this leave us? First, surely, we are freed from the anxiety that entry into the kingdom of the Father is somehow like collecting enough Nectar points; nor is it about surmounting impossible hurdles to become an unrecognisable superhuman version of ourselves. Jesus encourages us to become more like our God – more loving, more ready to serve, to reach out, to help – and so to become more prepared to hear the Father's voice saying, "Come, O blessed of my Father, receive the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."