Sermon for the Feast of Christ the King 22nd November 2020

‘I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep….I shall feed them with justice.’(Ezekiel 34: 15,16)

Some years go an American soldier on a bus in Sweden told the man next to him,

 ‘*America is the most democratic country in the world. Ordinary citizens may go to the White House to see the president and discuss things with him*.’

The man said, *‘That’s nothing. In Sweden, the king and the people travel on the same bus*.’

When the man got off the bus, the American was told by other passengers that he had been sitting next to King Gustav Adolf V!

We are unlikely to sit next to the Queen on the bus. The monarch is largely a figurehead in this country, despite being friendly in her appearances, is distant from the majority of the population, for security reasons among others.

But I do find it quite reassuring when the Queen is seen or heard, especially at important or difficult times.

And I think we have all needed reassurance and leadership from our government through the difficult months of 2020, and the slow realisation that this is a situation that is ongoing.

It is not, as they discovered in 1914, going to be ‘all over by Christmas’ but with the news of the vaccine we live with hope of actually being able to celebrate Christmas.

As the situation has developed over the year, with plans and rules changing all the time, there has been much discussion about what good leadership looks like, and how we should live to protect the well-being of all. Themes which are central to our readings today.

Ezekiel was a prophet called by God to be a prophet to a nation in crisis.

Those questions of leadership and well-being for all were central to his ministry.

He was taken captive to Babylon in the first wave of exiles taken from Jerusalem in 597 BC in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar.

And then nine years later, in 586 BC, those Jews left in Jerusalem rebelled against the Babylonians, and in retaliation, Jerusalem was completely destroyed.

A second wave of captives were taken to Babylon, which is located in Southern Iraq today.

So Ezekiel is commissioned by God to bring hope to these groups of exiles.

And our passage gives the words of God through the prophet, criticising the poor leadership of those who desperately need help.

And promising that God himself will take control and restore justice.

God promises to appoint a worthy king, one who will prioritise the marginalised and needy.

The imagery is of a shepherd, who will take care of his sheep.

And this Shepherd described by Ezekiel in his vision, will reject the wolves in sheep’s clothing who masquerade as leaders.

There will be a new kind of kingdom where justice will be restored and where there is hope of return from exile. This happened some 50 years later when the Persians conquered the Babylonians and permission was given for the Jews to return. But Ezekiel’s ministry gave hope and a future.

The imagery of Israel as a flock of sheep and the Good shepherd, is one which will very much inform many of the images Jesus uses, particularly in the discourse in John chapter 10 when he says: *‘I am the Good Shepherd*.’ In our Gospel reading some of this imagery is used again as the judgement is described as judging the nations before him as if dividing sheep from the goats.

But this is not the Good Shepherd making the judgement and pronouncing the sentence.

This is a very solemn occasion ‘*when,’* we are told*, ‘the Son of Man (* a term Jesus uses to describe himself in this Gospel*), comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.’* And in the judgement he is described as ‘the king.’

Is it a parable? Is it an apocalyptic vision of Christ’s return in glory?

This story is only told in Matthew’s Gospel and it is the final teaching that Jesus gives before we move on to the last Supper and the end of his life on earth.

And what a fitting final challenge to us all.

In many countries sheep and goats are herded together and only separated for shearing.

And both sheep and goats look very similar, often much scrawnier than our own well-fed animals.

But actually, it is only at the beginning that sheep and goats are mentioned.

Thereafter it is very clear that it is people who are being addressed.

Those who are praised and those who are condemned are equally surprised by the judgement. They didn’t set out to neglect or serve their King, so the sentence, based entirely on their response to human need, causes consternation and bewilderment. They are not judged by deeds of great bravery, or martyrdom, or evangelistic success, but solely by their respond to human need.

The two readings seem to come from such a different place. God as the shepherd in Ezekiel’s vision comes to nurture, to feed to protect and encourage the sheep, the lost people in exile.

And the leader who is to be sent to them is still described as ‘a shepherd, my servant David,’ combining the image of king and shepherd, someone who cares. This is so different from the scene of judgement, with the solemnity, the power and the glory of the King.

But in other ways there are powerful similarities.

In both readings there is harsh judgement and condemnation for those who should be the leaders, to teach and give hope, but who are too busy feathering their own nests.

Ezekiel’s vision uses the same animal imagery: *‘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*.’ (Ezekiel 34: 20)

It’s a very unpleasant physical image isn’t it?

Of the strong literally pushing and trampling over those around them and butting them with horns.

And in both passages the rule of love is raised above any other. In Ezekiel this love comes from God who will be the Good Shepherd to take over the care of his lost people.

‘*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*.’(34.16)

Jesus spent 3 years teaching in words and deeds that God is love and that his followers are to show that love. Christ identified with the marginalised, with ‘*the least of these’, so* that when we look at them, we are seeing him too.

People with specific needs, not generalised good will: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the sick, the prisoner. People we might not like, but are called upon to love. People in whose faces we should expect to see the face of Christ.

Yet even here there is a danger of over spiritualising. Be careful of saying to ourselves, *‘from now on, every time I see a person alone, or in prison, or hungry or thirsty, I shall not see that person, but I will see Christ.’*

Such an approach would render every needy person faceless and nameless, by those joyfully ‘*serving Christ’* rather than offering love to that person.

In essence there is only one commandment, the commandment of love, which is always expressed in action.   And, when it comes down to it, it is living lives of love that will build the kingdom of God here on earth.

I spoke about leadership at the beginning, and where to seek reassurance. But we are all commissioned, as followers of Christ, to offer hope and love, to be the building blocks of His kingdom. To love our neighbours is to love the one in whose image we and they, are made, and to recognise the divine image, not on stamps or coins but on their faces.

And when we are able to sit next to someone on the bus or train again, that child, man or woman, may turn out not to be the monarch, but someone in whom we can see God himself. Amen.

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