Sermon Notes

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 95:1-7;
Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

Christ the King (Sunday next before Advent) – 26 November 2017
**Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24**

In ancient times kings and rulers were described as shepherds of their people, confirmed by the title given to both Moses and David. Frequently, the leaders of Israel are criticised for being bad shepherds and here in this passage, Ezekiel condemns them for neglecting and exploiting the people.

Against this background and as a result of the failure of the shepherds, the LORD declares that he himself will be the shepherd of his people. He will gather them from the places to which they have been scattered and restore them. He will lead them to safe pastures, bind up their wounds, bring back the strays and strengthen the weak.

Ezekiel makes it clear that the powerful and prosperous citizens, who have been greedily taking for themselves all the good things of the land and denying others, are going to be judged by the shepherd. The flock will be purified, not only of its bad leadership but also of its bad members.

The LORD will send a descendent of the house of David as a true shepherd, which we can see being developed elsewhere, such as Psalm 23, and especially in the coming of Jesus Christ as the good shepherd, who will lay down his life for his sheep, as described in John 10, verses 11-18.

**Psalm 95:1-7**

Psalms 95 – 100 are a group of Psalms written in jubilant praise of the God who reigns over all his creation. Psalm 95 itself represents a call to worship, which stresses the authority and majesty of God as creator of the world, and notes the consequences of disobedience and rebellion against him.

Here, God is known as Rock, King and Creator, Maker and Shepherd and the one to whom obedience is owed. To his people the LORD is Saviour, the saving Rock, reliable and active, and King, who has made his people for himself, and as Shepherd they are secure in his commitment to them.

It is to the saved that the LORD calls for obedience and he takes his law seriously and enforces its disciplines if his people disobey.

The specific incident mentioned in verse 8 occurred in Exodus 17, verses 1-7, and is used as typical of a record of lack of trust. The people have more than enough evidence that the LORD can be trusted to provide in every situation.

Faced with an apparently waterless valley, they turned from trust to doubt, similar to the Pharisees of the New Testament, who closed their eyes to all that Jesus did.
**Ephesians 1:15-23**

Having rejoiced in the wonder of the gospel, the Apostle Paul now turns and gives thanks for the believers in the region.

Knowing that they already believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul prays that they might come to the full knowledge of his glory in every respect. They are called and chosen by God and they have hope; not vague optimism, but the confident certainty of eternal life.

Paul’s language strains to its limits as he tries to express his wonder of the richness of the gospel, which he and his readers have in common. They are able to come into a deep relationship with God, being made holy, to enjoy the presence of God in their lives.

The power of the risen Christ, under whose authority God has placed the present age, is available to believers through faith; the limitless power of God working in them and through them.

The key to the passage lies in the link between verse 20, ‘when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms’ and Ephesians 2, verse 6, ‘And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus’.

Because Christ reigns in glory, we who are ‘in Christ’ share privileges now which are a foretaste of untold glory to come. In Christ, God’s divine nature is seen in all its foulness. This is his gift to the Church, and through the Church to the whole of creation.

**Matthew 25:31-46**

The parable of the sheep and goats points to the ultimate separation of the good and the wicked, developing the ideas already found in the parable of the weeds (Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43) and the net (Matthew 13:47-50). However, the reference to the sheep and the goats is hardly more than a momentary comparison, prior to Matthew moving us on to develop the overwhelming theme of judgement.

Although not always regarded as a ‘conventional’ parable, it is very similar with the story and its interpretation interwoven, with a mixture of straight description (e.g. ‘When the Son of Man comes’) and of the pictorial (e.g. ‘as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.’).

The Son of Man is pictured here enthroned in glory as King and exercising his divine entitlement as Judge of all nations, as he separates the people into two categories, like a shepherd separating a mixed flock of sheep and goats.

He is, however, no harsh judge, devoid of sympathy, but who has been touched with the reality of our weaknesses, as we are reminded of other Bible passages which speak of God bringing salvation to his people through a new king in the family of David, who will rule in justice and righteousness.
Described as king, as the ‘Son’ of God, Jesus understands himself to be the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, and here he looks forward to the time when God will finally give the kingdom to his people, in and through him as the Son of Man, judging the nations with equity, saving and caring for those in need.

One striking feature of this story is the way the king, the Son of Man, identifies himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned. He speaks of them as ‘these brothers and sisters of mine’ and explains to his surprised hearers, ‘whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

With these words, the parable is correctly seen as Jesus’ classic statement of Christian social responsibility. Judgement will be on the basis of whether we love our neighbour as ourselves, ‘our neighbour’ defined in the parable of the Good Samaritan as anyone in need (Luke 10:25-37).

Ultimately, this parable brings out clearly the importance of a vital relationship with God and an expression of good works in the Christian life as a mark of true commitment to Christ.