

Feast of Christ the King Sunday 20 November 2011

At our meeting on Monday the lay ministers and I looked at the first lesson for this morning. I had found some discussion questions on the passage as well as a few thoughts on it and how it fits into the Feast of Christ the King by a Jesuit priest who said that it was "appropriate" that we should be celebrating "Christ the King" on this the last Sunday of the Church's year and the Sunday before Advent begins. This puzzled me last Monday and the reasons suggested by the Lay Ministers didn't help me to understand. So I spent some time doing exegesis on the readings for the Feast of Christ the King and looking at what commentaries had to say about them to see if I could see why it was appropriate to celebrate Christ the King on the last Sunday of the Church's year.

I came across a quotation from Tom Wright, the former Bishop of Durham who has now returned to the academic world at St Andrews University. He too seems to be questioning on how Jesus can be Christ the King. He said:

"...God is now in charge, and he is in charge in and through Jesus. That is the vision that explains what Jesus did and said, what happened to Jesus, and what his followers subsequently did and said. And what happened to them too.

But here is the puzzle -- the ultimate puzzle of Jesus. This puzzle boils down to two questions.

First, why would anyone say this of Jesus, who had not done the things people expected a victorious king to do? Why, indeed, did Jesus end up being crucified with the words "King of the Jews" above his head? And why would anyone, three minutes, three days, or three hundred years after that moment, ever dream of taking it seriously?

Second, what on earth might it mean today to speak of Jesus being "king" or being "in charge," in view of the fact that so many things in the world give no hint of such a thing?

Tom Wright

Our Ezekiel Reading does not help to clarify matters. It's CHRIST THE KING Sunday, so why are we reading about sheep and shepherds? On Monday the Lay Ministers wrestled with this imaginary. Obviously we are to take it symbolically.

This OT Ezekiel text is prophetic and it invokes the image of a shepherd because Israel's king was supposed to be taking care of the people the way a shepherd takes care of his sheep. One of the Lay ministers commented that the sudden appearance of the name David in the text seemed to remove it from its prophetic mode and put it into an historical mode. This of course is true because David was King before Ezekiel was born or became a prophet. But in this passage David himself becomes a symbol - a symbol of the ideal King or ruler. The image is of David the shepherd boy as the model of kingship and confirmed by the failure of subsequent kings to be good shepherds. In verses 20-24, Ezekiel shows us God taking over and making "David," the true shepherd, as our true King.

But what has this to do with CHRIST the King? In the Gospel Jesus described a time when all nations would be gathered (note the similarities to Ezekiel) and be judged in the presence of the Son of Man, who will be seated upon a throne and surrounded by the angels. That sounds pretty King-like to me. So let's explore the parable Jesus tells his disciples about the end of time and see what it can enlighten us about Christ the King.

The story of Jesus and the stories Jesus told are dense with images and symbols from the life of the pastoral nature of the people who lived in Palestine during Jesus' time on earth. This is no different. I'm no farmer so I'm relying on websites and commentaries here, but I'm told that goats are independent and must be driven from behind while sheep are followers and can be led by the shepherd. How does that impact on your thoughts about separating the sheep to the right and the goats to the left?

While the issue of judgment dominates most of our thinking about this parable, one commentator suggests we rather look at a minor theme; the fact that neither the sheep nor the goats recognized the LORD in the face of the poor. Isn't that interesting to think about? You see so often we are encouraged to be good to the poor because a) in so doing we are serving Christ himself, b) in so doing we are earning credit with the Father in Heaven or c) because Jesus liked and cared for poor and sick people we should like and serve them too. The problem is that none of these positions respects the poor or consider them worthy of our attention in and of themselves, and none of these

positions recognizes the fact that a person might have compassion for others without a self-interested benefit accruing.

What if the point of the parable is that while the goats are uninterested in the plight of the poor, the sheep are disinterested in what others (including God) think about their care for the poor? That sent me scurrying for my Oxford Dictionary in order to tell the difference between uninterested and disinterested. It told me that uninterested meant unconcerned, indifferent. While disinterested means not influenced by one's own advantage; impartial, free from personal interest. The people on the side of the goats were indifferent and unconcerned about the needs of the poor and oppressed while those disinterested on the sheep side did what needed to be done impartially and without personal interest or without looking for personal gain. For them it was something natural that had to be done from within their hearts and minds. A goat can no more produce wool than a sheep can stop it from growing. To do otherwise is simply contrary to the nature of either.

Jesus says that the unrighteous person can no more produce the fruits of righteousness – actions like feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and those in prison – than those who belong to him can **keep** from doing so.

So, sheep to the right; goats to the left; it is the job of the shepherd to send each creature to its appropriate fate. It's really as simple as that. Not that the sheep are good and the goats are bad – they just are what they are! This is kind of the way it is with the Lord's people, I suppose and some of us will be in for a shock. What ever you did for the least powerful you did for me. Whatever you failed to do for the least powerful you failed to do for me. And there are consequences. Do you know that on judgement day we will not be asked, 'Did you go to church, did you say your prayers, did you read your Bible?' When Christ is King we will not be asked religious questions, but political questions: 'Did you feed the hungry? Did you clothe the naked? Did you welcome the stranger? Did you visit the prisoner, care for the sick?' We will meet Christ not only on the throne of grace, but on the cross, and in the sacrament; not only in highest heaven, but among the least of the brethren. As we serve them, as Christ did, we meet him, and are changed.

As we come to the end of the Church's year it IS appropriate for us to think about whether we are ready to experience Christ the King - Christ as our King. I believe a member of our congregation, encountered the future King of England wandering around Kirstenbosch Gardens a week or so ago. He and his wife seemed to be without security and just wandering with the others and enjoying the ambiance of Kirstenbosch. Not at all what this parishioner expected – I mean kings we expect to encounter in the grand and the glorious manner. 'When the King shall come in his glory,' Jesus tells us in this morning's Gospel. But God is also to be found not in the grand and glorious manner but in the mere exchange of a cup of water.