

## Christ the Good Shepherd King.

Today is Christ the King Sunday and today both our Old Testament passage from Ezekiel and our gospel reading from Matthew concern the subject of Shepherds and their sheep. This image of a shepherd caring for his sheep is a widely used biblical image for the way in which God relates to his people. It is also an image that Jesus uses in the gospel of John. There he talks about himself as the Good Shepherd who even goes so far as to lay down his own life for his sheep.



On this Christ the King Sunday, when we think of Jesus as our King, the two readings lead us to consider what it means for our King to rule over us in the manner of a Good Shepherd.

In the book of Ezekiel, just before today's passage, Ezekiel writes that the Jewish exile in Babylon came about because of poor leadership from the kings in Jerusalem. Then, in our passage today, Ezekiel concludes that God has effectively decided that if, 'you want anything done right, you must do it yourself,' and will rescue his sheep himself rather than leave the job to earthly rulers. So here in the Old Testament, we find the prophecy that God will take the initiative himself, seek out his sheep and rescue them from where they have been scattered and will thereby bring them back to him. Effectively, he decides that he must rescue them from themselves. In the gospel of John, Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd who does these things and is therefore the realisation of the shepherd spoken about in Ezekiel. The task of rescuing God's people, from themselves, falls on Jesus as the Son of God.

Jesus, like a Good Shepherd, knows his sheep thoroughly and they also know him well. In a similar vein, Ezekiel tells of how God knows his sheep too. He knows whether they are lost, straying, injured or weak. He knows their condition and their weaknesses too. Ultimately, there is nothing about us that God does not know. In fact, he knows us far better than we know ourselves. There is a great comfort in knowing that God, through Jesus, knows all he needs to know about us, in order to help us, to protect us, and eventually to rescue us.

Now, I am sure that God wills every human being, indeed every living creature, to become one of his flock but it is clear from our gospel reading that not everybody will choose that course. God allows us the freedom, either to choose his way, or not, as the case may be, and the reading from Matthew, although couched in terms of judgement, gives a description of the way in which those who have chosen to enter God's flock, will behave.

It is clear from what Jesus says that those who are truly members of his flock will react in a particular way towards the needs of others. He gives specific but straightforward examples of this. His flock will give hungry people a meal or a thirsty person a drink. They will welcome strangers and will offer cheer to the sick. These are not costly things but things that are easy for his flock to do. The help his flock gives others will be uncalculating. It will not be proffered as a means of gaining merit with God or peers but out of a true compassion for those in need.

The most important thing that Jesus says is that when his flock helps others, in reality it is giving help to him. In this respect we might remember Saint Martin of Tours, who was the subject of my reflection a while ago. In his dream he saw the face of Jesus in the beggar he had helped by the gift of half his cloak on a cold winter's day. Those of us who would call themselves members of the Good Shepherds flock would do well to mimic Saint Martin and see the face of Christ our King on those who call upon them for help.

Perhaps, next time we walk around town and we see people asking for help, we might see the face of Jesus in them. We might also see his face in the oppressed in our country and in all children in need, wherever they may be and, maybe, if we look really hard, in all those dogs, cats, donkeys and pangolins, to name but a few of our fellow creatures, who suffer worldwide at the hands of our fellow human beings.

**Mervyn. (18th November 2020.)**