

St Brandon's, Sermon for 22nd November 2020.

Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24, Matthew 25:31–end

Shepherd King and Judge

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Last week, Grace preached for us on the parable of the talents, and Grace pointed out that the behaviour of each of the three servants, entrusted with their different amounts of money, reflected the kind of master they thought they were serving. Their actions reflected the masters' values as they saw them. I found that a very helpful interpretation because the parables carry different overtones and implications depending on our own situation and the lens through which we are looking.

Jesus has been telling a succession of parables to teach what it means to follow him and warn of the consequences of rejecting his teachings. Now he concludes them with this explicit word-picture of the last judgement. This is not a parable, this is Jesus spelling out in clear pictures what end time is going to look like. Its going to look like him, seated on his throne - Christ the King – judging every person according to whether they recognised him or not; those that did pass into eternal life and those that did not, into eternal punishment.

Unsurprisingly, our reaction is likely to be the puzzled reaction Jesus is predicting: “When did I see you, or fail to see you? Jesus answers, when you ministered to, or failed to minister to, the needy.

We'll come back to that point. First, I'd like to reflect a bit more on the readings.

In the Old Testament the image of the shepherd is used in various places to illustrate compassionate leadership. Ezekial, in today's Old Testament reading, is using the shepherd to illustrate the persistent diligence and care God will show in bringing his lost and scattered family of Israel back into their own land. Ezekial is with those captured and taken into exile in Babylon, he is writing this in the wake of hearing first hand testimony from a refugee about the destruction of Jerusalem which has been razed to the ground, burnt, and the inhabitants killed or scattered; it is January in the year 585 BC. This news causes him to prophesy, predicting this fabulous picture of God's flock restored to rich, safe pastures with God personally shepherding them.

However, within God's flock, the family of Israel, there have been abuses of power: stronger members have shoved out the weaker members, trampling on them and scattering them; leaders getting rich and fat at the expense of the poorest. We don't know if this was occurring amongst those in exile or those left in Palestine but this is not the example God has given them, it is not recognising his commandments and authority. God will not tolerate it but will judge even his own sheep to see who is a ravager, which sheep are to be removed from the flock and destroyed for their destructive behaviour.

Fifty years later, Ezekiel's prophecy came about, and the Jews were freed to return to their own land. But it took over 500 years longer for the promise not to leave them leaderless, that God would appoint his own shepherd, a descendent of David to lead and feed. We can recognise that prophesy as pointing to the birth of Jesus.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus owns that description of himself as the Good Shepherd. He inhabits it. He models it. He teaches about how as the Good Shepherd he will search out the one lost sheep; how his sheep will recognise his voice and follow him into safe pastures. We, therefore, define ourselves as sheep in his flock when we recognise him calling to us, and follow him.

Following him entails recognising more than just the sound of his voice, it requires listening and acting on his teaching, imitating the example he set us, recognising and reflecting his values.

Central to Jesus' focus are the weak and vulnerable, the powerless and displaced. Jesus is sharing in and working out a much bigger saving plan than Ezekial's prophesy of freedom from exile; this is a big vision of God's gathering of his flock which will go on happening until every last lost sheep is gathered in, a task completed only at the end of time - only its not just Israel now in that flock, it is all of us: a global flock.

When, at the end of time, the world is gathered before him, Jesus Christ, King and judge, will recognise the sheep from the goats: those that really are his sheep, that have made themselves truly part of his flock.

Those that have made themselves truly part of his flock have joined in with the work of bringing in the kingdom of God. They have shared in God's work: seeking the lost, bringing back the strayed, binding up the injured, strengthening the weak, in readiness for the homecoming of God's whole people, at the end of time.

I was thinking about the way the Jesus describes his followers being puzzled by him saying that they gave him food, they gave him something to drink, they welcomed him as the stranger and visited him in the prison. Its a rather bad analogy but it put me in mind of the way many couples grow to resemble each other as they get older, or people can look a bit like their pets: the older among us may remember the Thelwell cartoons. Well, its not a very good analogy but there's perhaps something of that going on here.

Jesus is so focussed on the weak and vulnerable, the powerless and displaced, he so fully associates himself with them that he makes them part of his identity, and himself part of their identity; he is particularly close to them: to see them is to see Christ; to give to them, is to give to Christ.

His identifying with the lowest in power and circumstance leads him, the King of Glory, to say

“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.”

This is not a parable but a word-picture. Jesus is describing as clearly as he can that the way to prepare for end time is to follow him, the Shepherd King by his example of loving one's neighbours. Our actions should reflect the values of our master, those commandments to love God with all our might and to love one's neighbour as oneself. Especially to love the neighbour who is poor and marginalised, on this we will be judged at the end of time.

I saw a quote in connection with this that I liked, it is from Anthony the Great, “Virtue is not far from us, nor is it without ourselves but it is within us, and is easy if only we are willing.”

Charity is the true test of faith, it is the evidence and outworking of the kingdom of heaven in you; we will be judged by simple works of charity and the reward will be to inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

Amen