

SERMON FOR CHRIST THE KING AT WINTERBOURNE STOKE: 26 NOV 2023
(based on Ezekiel 34:11-16 & 20-24, and Matt.25:31-46)

What do we know about heavenly God's Kingdom, and how might we at least try to reproduce it on earth?

Today we reach the end of the church year, and Advent Sunday will mark the beginning of the next one. So we end the year with a celebration of Christ's kingship as we head towards the point where it all began – his birth. And yet the lowly circumstances of that birth contrast hugely with the concept of kingship at least as we might define it. Our readings today draw our attention to the differences between divine and earthly kingship. Over the past few Sundays, we have had a series of readings about God's kingdom. Today we hear about the attributes of a heavenly king, reigning in a kingdom not yet fully knowable, and only partially glimpsed by us on earth.

Nowadays, kings and queens, in the western world at least, wield little power directly over their subjects, so today's equivalent of Biblical kings might be presidents, prime ministers, and governments. What do we associate with that sort of power and authority? I'm afraid that the cynic in me tends to think of more negative things than positive. So I see governments making decisions aimed at keeping them in power; I see presidents shackled by opposing parties and having to compromise in order to retain the votes of powerful pressure groups; I see unwise alliances that result in wars that are neither just nor likely to solve the underlying issues. And turning to our Old Testament reading, was that any different in Ezekiel's day? I don't think so!

In the verses before our passage, Ezekiel reflects on Israel's exile, which he believed had come about because of the self-seeking rulers in Jerusalem. He accuses them of pure self-interest. "You shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? With force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, with no one to search or seek for them". Here, the metaphor of shepherd for king immediately brings to mind attributes that reflect neither those displayed by past kings of Israel, nor indeed rulers today. We tend to think of shepherds as protectors, wanting the best for their flocks - and that is precisely the point being made.

Today's reading opens with Ezekiel describing God's version of kingship. "I myself will search for my sheep", God says. His kingdom involves taking care of the lost, weak and vulnerable in the flock; it also means judging the bullies who feast and get fat on the best pasture. A good ruler judges wisely, ensuring that the powerful do not abuse their position to the detriment of the poor. His rule is nurturing, healing and seeks to restore justice in an unjust world. But a prophecy about heavenly rule needs to be made into something tangible on earth, and we are told that it will start with David.

Naturally, many interpret this part of the prophecy to be looking ahead to Jesus, himself referred to as having come from the lineage of David. The New Testament is full of shepherd and sheep imagery, designed to help us understand God's purpose and what Jesus had come to do. Matthew, too, Jesus uses shepherd as a metaphor for king. The words "as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" are followed by reference to the king sitting in judgement over who will inherit the kingdom. Those who threaten the well-being of the flock will be separated from them. Anyone who has seen Countryfile on the TV will know that shepherds, and their dogs, are very adept at separating out particular sheep. At lambing time, farmers are often up through the night taking care of the pregnant sheep. A shepherd makes decisions based on the needs of the flock - his, or her, commitment cannot be partial or half-hearted.

And these are attributes that can apply to us too, for we are not only the sheep of God's earthly kingdom, but his shepherds as well. We might, for example, ask ourselves what the ratio is between the decisions we make for the benefit of others and those we make purely in our own interests. Christ as shepherd king prioritises the needs of the weak, the poor, and the powerless. And our role is to follow that example, be it as shepherds, or as part of the flock. Jesus makes clear in the gospel reading that turning our backs on the needs of others is not acceptable: "just as you did not do it to one of the least, you did not do it to me", he says: this is the sin of omission, of inaction. But when we do act, we are not alone - we have God and each other, co-helpers in fulfilling our shepherding roles.

Returning to the wider perspective of world leaders and rulers, what might we expect of them? Sometimes the situation is not clearcut. For example, what about the leader who is trying to protect their country and its people from attack by an oppressive regime? All too often in the world today, we see that some actions undertaken in the interests of one flock have repercussions for another. History tells us that lessons are not learned and humankind will never be able to emulate Christ-like kingship in full. Even those hearing him at the time were hoping for an earthly king – one who was just, but more importantly to them, one who would replace the authoritarian rule of the Romans. But Jesus was not that sort of king and his kingdom does not necessarily look like anything we can imagine.

As Ezekiel and Matthew make very clear, we are responsible for the shape we are in. Humankind acts in ways that ensure there will always be haves and have-nots. But we don't have to leave all the action to the politicians – in small yet significant ways, we can be shepherds in our own communities. Indeed, isn't it what we are called to do, not as kings or leaders, but as neighbours and friends? So on this 'Stir up Sunday', as we mix together all the ingredients that make up our Christmas cakes and puds, we might reflect on how we can bring together the wonderful folk in our own communities.

In the name of Christ, amen.