

"The Character of King."

Christ the King, the Sunday before Advent, November 26th 2017.

Main passage Ezekiel 34:v11-16 & 20-24.

Also Matthew 25:v31-end.

Today our church calendar comes to an end, with this Sunday of Christ the King. We begin the church year with Advent (next Sunday), where we look to the Messiah's first coming and his return. And the church year ends, as we remember who is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords - Christ. Christ is Christos Pantokrator - Christ is ruler of all (in Greek).

What king of king is Christos Pantokrator? Ezekiel 34 we look at, which shows us we have a shepherd king.

Ezekiel 34 is a passage, a prophecy, just after the fall of Jerusalem, given to the prophet Ezekiel who is himself in exile in the region of Babylon. The kings - the shepherds of Israel - have been condemned for their greed and selfishness.

We begin first with vv20-24. The Lord promises to place over his flock, one shepherd, of the line of David, a servant and a prince, who will care for and be *the* shepherd of God's sheep.

Jesus in John 5 had declared: "the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does, the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does." (5:v19). His mission flows the leading and direction of the Father. But not only does he declare his mission is of the Father, in John 8, (vv54-59), he declares himself not only to be known by God but to be one with God. And in John 10,v30, he declares "I and the Father are one." In that same chapter 10, he famously declares:

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me - just as the Father knows me and I know the Father - and I lay down my life for the sheep."

So Ezekiel's words - we reflect not only on what the Lord God is saying, how he is giving hope and comfort to his exiled people - we see the Lord describes himself as a shepherd and this helps us understand and see how Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who is one with the Father, how he as a shepherd treats us...

1. The Lord will search. Like a shepherd searches when the sheep is scattered, the Lord will seek, search, gather, the Lord will do this. He will rescue his sheep from places of danger, bring them back from wherever they have gone, to bring them home.

We see the love of God - his heart of compassion for his sheep.

When we consider scripture, we see the idea of lost sheep described in two ways. The first way is that all humanity who do not know Christ are lost sheep. Those - from all nations - whom the Lord seeks to bring home to the fold. Luke 15 shares the famous parable of the lost sheep, heaven rejoicing when people return to God.

The second way, is to see lost sheep as those who chose Jesus as their Good Shepherd, and yet have become lost...

Christians can become lost sheep by what has been done to them. They have been hurt by poor, sinful, leadership in churches, or they have become hurt by the actions of other sheep, who hurt them, drove them away, maybe not by physical actions but by words, attitudes or looks. A friend of mine - Chloe - was one of the university staff when I trained as a minister. Chloe was young, good looking, had a PhD in Chinese Literature. She told me how she visited one of the main student churches in Durham - she went three times - no one spoke to her at anytime. She didn't go back - she decided to go back to her parent's church. In the United States, there is a category of research which has revealed there is a generation - of mostly 20-30 year olds - who have been called 'done' generation. They are 'done' with church. They have rejected church not because of the big questions of faith, but rejected church because of the attitude of church leaders and the church community: the church drove them away from church.

Others are lost for they never settled in a church community, perhaps they got out of the habit of going and so their faith which burned bright, burned low. For others, life changes - new job, babies born, life rhythm changes - and they never settled back into the ways that nurture faith.

There are people like this in Amersfoort. Do we know them? If we do, have we maintained good contact? Sometimes in lives, God acts directly, stirs something, they come back to him, they begin to settle in a church community again. We hear testimonies of such people so touched directly.

But we may be the answer. Shane Claiborne, who leads a 'new monastic' community in Philadelphia, notes that many times we ask God to do something about pain and suffering or to help someone come back to him ... and we may hear God say to us: "I already did so something, I made you."

As the passage later repeats, "I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak..." (v16). In the film *Batman Begins*, Bruce Wayne says to Alfred: "You still have n't given up on me, have you?" Alfred replies confidently and with a smile: "Never!" Our Good shepherd, never gives up on anyone. His love for his sheep. His desire for the strays to come home. For the injured to be healed. The weak to gain strength again. I love the promise in the passage of Galatians 5, the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control." Where people feel they can no longer love, no longer have peace, no longer have gentleness, the Lord can bring that love, peace, gentleness again, he can bring healing...

2. Where does the Shepherd King bring his sheep.

Ezekiel shares that the sheep are brought home. What is home? It is a good grazing land, a rich pasture. We see the heart of the Father - the people of Israel, chosen by him, blessed, loved, have regularly rejected him and turned to other gods to worship. They have gone into exile due to their sins against the Shepherd King. He could have brought them home to any land. But he will bring them back - to their home - but not a home of a wasteland, but to *rich good* pasture.

We see this in the Parable of the Prodigal / Lost Son (Luke 15). The son has suffered failure, wasted all, recognises his sins, he returns home, and yet he is offered robes, sandals, a ring, renewed status. He came home, and received so much more than he expected. Now what if he had said "No Father,

"I'd rather be a slave, not a son?" Jesus said, in John 10, the verse before he declares he is a good shepherd, he says: "the thief comes only to steal and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (10:v10). Our shepherd king who seeks to bring fullness of life.

You know it is possible to have the attitude of the elder son in the Parable of the Lost Son. In fact it has been said the parable should be called by us, "the prodigal of the lost sons." The elder son, tells his father, "look all these years I have been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet he never gave me even a young goat to celebrate with my friends..." The father replies: "My son, you are always with me and everything I have is yours..."

The elder son never saw or perhaps never understood where he was and who was his father. Is it possible to have the faith of a servant and not the faith of a son or daughter? I believe God wants, longs to bring good things into our lives. We face hardships, suffering, perhaps persecution for being a Christian, but in all this our God remains a good, loving, giving King. It is possible to lose that vision - to have the faith only of a servant, like the elder son, than to embrace the faith of being a loved son or daughter of the shepherd king...

3. Finally, our Shepherd King is a King of Justice. Some things are right. Some are wrong. How we put our faith into practice matters to Christ - we see that in Matthew 25:v31-end - where the small things, help the thirsty, help the hungry, clothe the naked (like St Maarten and his cut cloak), welcome stranger, visit the prisoner. Many of these are small things. And are expected of the one who is a believer in Christ.

The Lord says of the sheep who hurt others, strong sheep who shove, butt, wound, and even drive away - the Lord sees, cares and is *against* us when we act in such ways and hurt other sheep of his flock.

Such verses in a passage asks us to pray the prayer which ends Psalm 139. In that psalm, David declares how before a word is on his tongue the Lord knows it, that the Lord knows all his thoughts and attitudes, and even when he was in the womb, the Lord saw him. This awesome God who sees and knows all. And so at the end of this psalm, he prays:

"Search me O God and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

Is that a prayer we can pray? To invite the Lord to show us where we have hurt other members of the flock, have we caused them pain, or even drove them away? To seek the Lord in prayer and ask him to reveal where we, you, I, may have done so...

Christ the King. The character of our King. He is a Shepherd King, cares, searches brings home the sheep, the lost, strays, injured, weak, who cares about injustice among the sheep. Christ is the good shepherd who does all this.

Amen.