

Ezekiel 34.11-16,20-24

Ephesians 1.15-23

Matthew 25.31-46

I find the feast of Christ the King difficult and challenging as I am trying to hold some contrasting images in my mind:

On the one hand the hymn *Christ triumphant ever reigning*, which we will be singing at 10 o'clock.

Christ triumphant ever reigning,

Saviour, Master, King,

Lord of heav'n, our lives sustaining,

Hear us as we sing: Yours the glory and the crown, the high renown,

the eternal name. (full text at the end of the sermon)

A beautiful hymn with words Michael Saward and a strong, catchy tune by John Barnard.

On the other hand the images that I see on our television screen or read in the news:

The refugee camps in Syria, facing the onset of winter and no hope of their country returning to stability.

Thousands affected by the ebola virus, fighting for their lives, mourning the loss of loved ones .

Millions of people in Sudan facing starvation

Closer to home Young people with mental health issues in our overcrowded, understaffed prisons, not getting the help they need – committing suicide.

How do we hold these conflicting images together? How does Christ the King, triumphant, ever reigning, speak to our world where the gap between rich and poor is ever increasing; where we can fly a probe 300 million miles into space, but are struggling to combat a virus like ebola; where many of the nations are in tumult; where our prisons are bulging in their seams.

Whilst the words of the hymn may not quite resonate with the reality of our world, this morning's scriptures certainly do.

I imagine that the refugees of Syria or of Northern Iraq might be able to relate to the words of the prophet Ezekiel, we heard in our first reading. These originate in the 6th century B.C., when the priest Ezekiel found himself among the three thousand Jews who were exiled to Babylon under the direction of [Nebuchadnezzar II](#), in 597.

And once in Babylon, the leaders of Israel looked after their own needs ignoring the welfare of the people or God's commands.

Ezekiel, not mincing his words, named their shameless and cruel behaviour, reminding them that kingship in Israel went hand-in-hand with being like a good shepherd.

(Ez.34 vs 16 'I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.')

The close link between kingship in Israel and good shepherding explains, why we find the metaphor of sheep and goats in this morning's gospel reading, with the Son of man sitting in judgement.

'When the Son of Man comes in glory, then he will take his seat on his throne in glory, And he will separate the nations assembled in front of his throne, the sheep on one side and the goats on the other.' (Vvs 31-33).

In the Middle East sheep and goats were/ are hearded together during the day, but at night they are separated, the goats are put in a pen as they are less able to resist the cold of night. As such, this idea of separating the goats and the sheep would have been very familiar to Jesus contemporaries listening to these words.

The reading makes it very clear who is welcomed into Christ's kingdom: those who are poor, sick, homeless, on the margins of society, even those in prison.

And those who noticed them and showed them compassion and care; those who know that Christ himself is found in the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers & refugees, the poor, the sick and those in prison.

We usually think about this gospel story depicting the last judgement.

But Jesus has already come into his glory! We believe in the risen Christ who has ascended to heaven!

But Jesus did not come into his glory by assuming power in a worldly manner, for example overthrowing the Roman armies and anyone else who was oppressing the people of Israel.

No, Jesus has come into his glory by identifying with the rejected, the tortured, the oppressed to the extent that he was prepared to suffer torture and a humiliating death on the cross.

This morning's gospel story is the last story before the passion story in Matthew's gospel. He wants to show us that Jesus' glorious, kingly presence is achieved through his own willingness to suffer and die. Jesus' death on the cross becomes a judgement on all peoples – as well as an anticipation of the last judgement.

Jesus made it very clear where God is to be found.

Today, as we are standing before Christ the King.

We may want to ask ourselves:

will we be among those to whom he says 'Come, you are the blessed of my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you...

For I was hungry and you gave me food,

I was thirsty and you gave me something to eat,

I was sick and you took care of me.

I was in prison and you visited me.

Jane Williams, in her reflections on this reading ‘...what makes the Son of Man such a terrible judge – [his] judgement is not something alien and distant, but something that bears the human face of the neglected, the tortured, the crucified. God is not far away, and not easy to deceive, and we cannot plead that we did not know what he wanted of us.’ (p131 lectionary reflections YearA)

Perhaps, there is mercy and hope for us that at least we know where to find to him. And we know there are times when all we can do is to cope with life by holding on to his cross (*holding cross*). And we do show compassion, and pray for our suffering world and those in need; we give of our time and money to reach out to those in need.

Of course, there is mercy and hope for us in that Christ the King is the good shepherd, who laid down his life, for us, too; who identifies with the poverty of our human nature, too, and was willing to suffer all the consequences of it to show a way to life and freedom and redemption.

Next week we are starting the season of Advent – a season of preparation for his coming as a baby to be born in a stable, in poverty, among strangers.

It’s a time where we are invited to ponder this reality – that our God, our king is to be found in the children of Bethlehem and the Syrian refugees camps; in the homes of Ebola sufferers in Freetown and Monrovia.

Next week is the beginning of Advent – a time of repentance and preparation also for the second coming – let’s ponder the fact that Christ’s judgement bears the human face of the neglected, the tortured, the crucified.

I didn’t want to spoil the hymn ‘Christ triumphant’ for us – but as we sing it, let us not forget that he has come into his glory through his passion and death on the cross, so that we may know where he can be found until he comes again. Amen.

Hymn

Christ triumphant ever reigning,
Saviour, Master, King,
Lord of heav'n, our lives sustaining,
Hear us as we sing:
Yours the glory and the crown,
the high renown,
the eternal name.

Word incarnate, truth revealing,
Son of Man on earth!
Power and majesty concealing
By your humble birth:

Suffering servant, scorned, ill-treated,
Victim crucified!
Death is through the Cross defeated,
Sinners justified:

Priestly King, enthroned for ever
High in heaven above!
Sin and death and hell shall never
Stifle hymns of love:

So, our hearts and voices raising
Through the ages long,
Ceaselessly upon you gazing,
This shall be our song: