

**A Podcast for North Coventry Group – 22 November 2020
- Last Sunday after Pentecost, 2020**

Hello and welcome to a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This has been prepared for the 22 November, the last Sunday after Pentecost, 2020.

Details of music and sources are in the online transcript, and I would like to thank Erica and Olive for their help in preparing this week's edition. Thanks again to Louise for acting as Olive's sound engineer.

Music¹: Concerto for 2 violins, strings & continuo in D Minor ("Double"),
BWV 1043, by Johann Sebastian Bach
played by the English Chamber Orchestra,
with soloists Anne-Sophie Mutter & Salvatore Accardo

There are many references to sheep in the bible, and to shepherds. This weekend sees the festival of Christ the King, as we come to the end of the Church year – next weekend sees Advent begin. Christ is both shepherd and king. Here are words from the book of the prophet Ezekiel in which the role of the shepherd is explored both from the point of view of a protector and that of a judge:

Call to Worship: Ezekiel 34.20-24

²⁰ "Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says to them: see, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹ Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, ²² I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered.

I will judge between one sheep and another. ²³ I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. ²⁴ I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken.

And here is a paraphrase of words from Psalm 72, by Isaac Watts, in which he unhesitatingly identifies Jesus as the ideal king for which the psalmist was longing. Jesus shall reign...

Hymn: *Jesus shall reign where'er the sun*, a paraphrase of Psalm 72,12-19
by Isaac Watts (1674-1748)
Sung by the York Minster Choir,
from the album, *Best-Loved Hymns from York Minster*

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
does his successive journeys run;
his kingdom stretch from shore to shore
till moons shall wax and wane no more.

Blessings abound where 'ere he reigns –
the prisoner leaps to lose his chains,
the weary find eternal rest,
and all that suffer want are blessed.

People and realms of every tongue
dwell on his love with sweetest song,
and children's voices shall proclaim
their early blessings on his name.

Let every creature rise and bring
peculiar honours to our king;
angels descend with songs again
and Earth repeat the loud 'Amen!'

Prayers

Let us pray

Lord, in ancient times the people longed for a king to take charge, to show the way, to bring about a time of peace and to lead your people to a better place.

We too long for better times. We long for peace after turmoil, for calm after upset, and for hope after despair. Even where there is health, it feels precarious in a time when no one seems safe. And where there is sickness we have seen examples of fit and energetic people becoming critically ill. Wealth and privilege are no protection. Age is not a guide. Lord, in a time when all are at risk we pray for inspiration for those making rules and for those seeking to perfect vaccines. And continuing stamina and resolution among those we rely on in our caring professions and among our key workers.

We thank you for the good things we can continue to enjoy and which comfort us. Times of sunshine as well as showers. The light that comes after darkness. Homes that shelter us, food and drink which sustain us.

We are grateful that we can still worship you, even in days when the usual buildings are shut and when gathering, praying with others and singing together are made temporarily illegal. We thank you for the gift of communication, and for those who keep both traditional and modern channels open for us to share.

As weeks pass, we move closer to the time of year when we think of your Son coming among us. In this difficult time may we find new ways to examine old truths and concentrate on the meaning of Christmas even while we lack the traditional trimmings. For in Jesus you brought your creation closer to you, in following Jesus our shepherd we learn the right path to follow through life and in the words he taught his disciples we can bring our concerns to you every day:

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in Heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Scriptureⁱⁱ: Matthew 25.31-46

A reading from Matthew's Gospel, in chapter 25, verses 31 to 46

The sheep and the goats

³¹ 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

³⁴ 'Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to

drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was ill and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

³⁷ ‘Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you ill or in prison and go to visit you?”

⁴⁰ ‘The King will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

⁴¹ ‘Then he will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was ill and in prison and you did not look after me.”

⁴⁴ ‘They also will answer, “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or ill or in prison, and did not help you?”

⁴⁵ ‘He will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.”

⁴⁶ ‘Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.’

Hymn: *The King of love my Shepherd is* by H W Baker (1821-77)
sung by the Choir of Westminster Abbey,
with Martin Neary and Martin Baker
from the album, *Favourite Hymns from Westminster Abbey*

The King of love my Shepherd is,
whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am his
and he is mine for ever.

In death’s dark vale I fear no ill
with thee, dear Lord, beside me;
thy rod and staff my comfort still,
thy cross before to guide me.

Where streams of living water flow
my ransomed soul he leadeth;
and where the verdant pastures grow,
with food celestial feedeth.

Thou spread’st a table in my sight,
thy unction grace bestoweth;
and O what transport of delight
from thy pure chalice floweth!

Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,
but yet in love he sought me,
and on his shoulder gently laid,
and home, rejoicing, brought me.

And so through all the length of days
thy goodness faileth never;
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise
within thy house for ever!

Reflection (1)

In that hymn we bring together the themes both of sheep and shepherds and kingship that are appropriate to this weekend. Of course it’s a paraphrase of Psalm 23, and follows the words of the psalm fairly closely. But Baker has brought the psalm into the Christian realm, and this shepherd is also Jesus, the King of love. The King.

To be a king is to take on multiple roles, and perhaps I can look at this from the point of view of kingship in earlier ages. There is the national leader role – once upon a time this would have involved leading armies into battle. There is the role of administering justice –

judges were once appointed not so much as a career option for lawyers but to substitute for the king when he was not able to preside over the court for himself. There is the law **making** role – whether or not with a parliament’s help the monarch used to determine what was and wasn’t allowed. New or amended laws in the UK are still subject to ‘Royal Assent’.

But in all of this the core responsibility was to be taking care of the realm, making sure there was security and – up to a point – prosperity for all.

Our own Queen, when crowned, was presented with all sorts of symbolic bits and pieces to remind her and all of those watching just what her obligations were – for example at one point the Archbishop of Canterbury was to hand her a rather heavy sword and say,

*With this sword do justice,
stop the growth of iniquity,
protect the holy Church of God,
help and defend widows and orphans,
restore the things that are gone to decay,
maintain the things that are restored,
punish and reform what is amiss,
and confirm what is in good order:*

...before the sword went back to the Jewel House in the Tower of London.

The widows and the orphans. It is a short but very *Old Testament prophet* list of those who should be looked after – the marginalised in ancient society. And those on the fringes without the advantages of wealth or status were precisely those that Jesus came to minister to and to hold up as examples to the better off members of his own society in his own time.

And so in Jesus, if we identify him as King, we had a King who was prepared to walk the walk as well as talking the talk and took on a servant’s role despite being by birthright absolutely at the other end of the scale – the top of it, in fact.

Shepherds were humble people, typically servants of the community, but in Jesus we had a King who was a shepherd. We have heard often enough how he fulfilled the shepherd role and how he used the relationship between a shepherd and sheep to illustrate God’s love even for each single individual. How do we approach the idea of him acting as a King?

In our Gospel reading from Olive we heard a picture of the King sitting in judgement. And this represented the last days, the end of time. A time when, by this vision, there will be a reckoning. No surprise, even if like me you would find it hard to imagine God ever finally giving up on anyone and tossing them on the scrapheap.

In this picture the souls are lined up and the classic division takes place, like a shepherd dividing the sheep from the goats. No one perfect, that’s for sure. All relying on the mercy of God.

With that image in mind here are traditional words from the Requiem Mass, from Mozart’s Requiem. This is the movement that Mozart had begun but hadn’t finished at the time of his own death: *Lacrimosa dies illa:*

Full of tears will be that day
when from the ashes shall arise
the guilty man to be judged;
therefore spare him, O God,
merciful Lord Jesus,

grant them eternal rest. Amen.

Music: *Lacrimosa*, from the Requiem in D Minor, K. 626
by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
performed by the Monteverdi Choir, with
John Eliot Gardiner & English Baroque Soloists

Lacrimosa dies illa
Qua resurget ex favilla
Judicandus homo reus.
Huic ergo parce, Deus,
Pie Jesu Domine,
Dona eis requiem. Amen

Reflection (2)

I have heard it said jokingly that monarchy is the fastest thing in the world. The kingship, the right to rule, moves from one individual to another in an instant. The rights bring with them privileges and also responsibilities. But – and again this especially applied in times gone by – they brought powers. In medieval times they were even supposed to bring miraculous healing powers – the so-called King’s Touch that people believed up to the reign of our own Stuart kings would cure the skin disease scrofula.

But let’s think of the powers to dispense justice. This is the vision conjured up by Jesus’ words in Matthew chapter 25, which he is shown speaking to his disciples in private as he talks about the future and his second coming. This weekend’s passage falls just after the parable of the talents that I spoke about last week, and you may remember I explained that story as a warning to try to do something with God’s gifts, to answer the call, even if we feel inadequate.

This story has a similar message, but told through different characters, who themselves have different mindsets. The servant with one talent had a very clear idea of what he had done, or not done. He hid the resources he had been given and failed to make anything of them. He should have known better, and the outcome in terms of return – zero profit – was entirely predictable.

This time round we have the souls divided like sheep from goats. Having seen some of each of these animals in hot countries I like to think that these animals represent very similar creatures who at first glance are hard to tell apart. For the people being rewarded or punished have each spent their lives doing what they felt was right but without any sense that they were rising or falling in God’s favour, in the eyes of the King.

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was ill and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

‘Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you ill or in prison and go to visit you?”

You know the story and the outcome in the story. This is not about hiding God’s resources; it is about seizing opportunities. It is not a warning against doing nothing, and I am sorry if that

sounds like a double negative. It's also a warning against waiting for something more obviously and even publicly worthy to come along before we give of our money or our time.

I've thought often about the implications of this story for Christians and churches today. I've wondered about what it says to my comfortable life here in Coventry, with house and garden and food in the freezer when there are people sleeping rough in the middle of town.

But there are times when a cause is brought to my attention and I do something or more often give something. If Jesus called me to account today, I would be surprised if I had done enough. And perhaps that surprise, as opposed to satisfaction, would put me with the sheep.

Prayers of Intercession

We come before God with our prayers for the Church and for the World. Let us pray.

Lord, how can we live up to the challenge of following you? You give a list of those individuals who needed help in the society you lived in – those without food, those without homes, those needing comfort and care, those in prison, perhaps unjustly. Our fellow members of the human family are still suffering, in all of these categories and more.

Help us to give generously and spontaneously from our stores of time and money. Help us to influence others and those who govern us to allocate the right resources in the right places. In a week where it has been proposed to reduce overseas aid to balance the nation's books, failing to meet existing commitments, may we all look at our priorities. As we enter the phase of the year when bargains are dangled in front of us around so-called Black Friday and pressure is felt by many to spend in advance of Christmas what cannot be afforded, may the needs of others be factored in.

Guide us in your ways, Lord. Where there is want, help us to notice and to act.

Where there is illness and grief, give us courage to respond.

Where we see strangers, help us to show a welcoming face.

Where there is injustice, let us and our Church demand fairness and not turn away in apathy.

Lord, how can we live up to the challenge of following you? We ask for your mercy and forgiveness, but also for your Spirit and for inspiration to find the right way to live – truly part of Christ's body on Earth.

In the name of Jesus our shepherd and our King. Amen.

Hymn: *Rejoice, the Lord is King*, words by Charles Wesley (1707-88)
sung by the Marlborough College Chapel Choir
from the album *Complete English Hymnal, Volume 2*

Rejoice, the Lord is King!
Your Lord and King adore:
mortals, give thanks and sing,
and triumph evermore:

*Lift up your heart, lift up your voice:
rejoice! – again I say, rejoice!*

Jesus the Saviour reigns,
the God of truth and love;
when he had purged our stains
he took his seat above:

*Lift up your heart, lift up your voice:
rejoice! – again I say, rejoice!*

His kingdom cannot fail;
he rules o'er earth and heaven;
the keys of death and hell
are to our Jesus given;
*Lift up your heart, lift up your voice:
rejoice! – again I say, rejoice!*

He sits at God's right hand
till all his foes submit,
and bow to his command,
and fall beneath his feet:
*Lift up your heart, lift up your voice:
rejoice! – again I say, rejoice!*

Blessing

May we be neighbours to all of God's children and respond to their needs in love.

And may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with us all today and for ever. Amen

Music: *Recuerdos De La Alhambra*, by Francisco Tárrega
played by Miloš Karadaglić
from the album *Mediterráneo*

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Credits

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ⁱⁱ Bible quotations are all taken from the New International Version, Anglicised Edition