

The Reign of Christ ~ Nov. 22, 2020

Ezekial 34: 11-16, 20-24; Psalm 95: 1-7a; Ephesians 1: 15-23; Matthew 25: 31-4

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘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.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

We’re at the end of the church year, which unfortunately does not mean the end of 2020, as is lamented by so many...In light of the adversity and challenge this year has and continues to pose, what does today – the Reign of Christ and antecedent to

Advent – have to say to us? What light can this feast, which celebrates the nearness of God’s kingdom, shed on our weary, pandemic-ridden world?

If it weren’t for the goats in the gospel, one might think the appointed readings are for Good Shepherd Sun. (4th Sun. of Easter), rather than the last Sun. of Pentecost. It makes sense really, in that today’s feast, also known as Christ the King, is about the divine shepherd’s rule. You can almost hear the 23rd psalm (always assigned on Easter 4), echoed in the Ezekial reading:

I will feed [my sheep] with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD.

Israel desperately needed a Shepherd King. Her people were scattered in the Babylonian Exile, and hurting because of their own misdeeds, as well as the injustices they suffered. The prophet Ezekiel was one of those exiled sheep. God had sent him along with one part of the flock, so that the Word of the Lord would be heard even in that God-forsaken place. Unlike those Israelite kings (and priests and prophets) who were only interested in taking care of themselves, Yahweh will take care of his flock. In view of their failure, says God, “I myself” will do the shepherding.

The divine shepherd has a particular care for the lost and vulnerable and sick and starving – the “least of these” as the gospel denotes. Their pain causes God pain. And as Christ’s body, it is our pain as well, perhaps more keenly felt these past months than in decades.

I did my first personal care home Zoom worship last week with Golden Door. It was wonderful to be able to see familiar faces and be with one another again. If it weren’t for this and other technology that we, along with numerous other organizations, churches and businesses are using, many otherwise isolated people – especially the “least of these” - would have little or no means of outside connection.

The injustices of insufficient care, neglect and deprivation in care homes, in First Nations have been brought to light by this pandemic. Not only will the Shepherd King care for his hurting flock, but he will also bring justice against those who have hurt them. For a good shepherd, it is not enough to heal hurts; she must also

ensure that the causes of that hurt are removed:

“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 “fat and strong” are not only the Babylonian enemies of Israel, but Israelites themselves who have gotten fat off their own brothers and sisters, and butted them away from their rightful green pastures and still waters.

For those of you who are viewers of *The Crown* on Netflix, Season 4 was recently released. I’m not going to say that I binge-watched, but I am looking forward to season 5...I certainly don’t wish to spoil anything for those who may be viewing at a more leisurely pace, but as a matter of historical record, certain royals were butted away and effectively negated for being the “least of these”.

Whatever the division – be it Ezekial’s between fat sheep and lean sheep, or Matthew’s between sheep and goats – the point remains that, as we’ve heard time and time again over these past months, we are in this *together*. As the divine shepherd cares and advocates for the sheep, so are we to do for one another, especially the “least of these”, even as we ourselves are tended. The kingdom of God and Shepherd’s reign is as near as those with eyes to see the invisible and ears to hear the voiceless.

There’s a reason that a portion of the Matthew reading is incorporated into the Good Friday liturgy. During the Meditation on the Cross, when the large wooden cross stands in front of our altar, these words are shared:

“I came to you as the *least* of your brothers and sisters; I was hungry and you gave me no food; I was thirsty and you gave me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.”

We are living in unsettling and uncertain times. Paul’s prayer for the Ephesian Christians is for us his readers as well: that with the eyes of our heart enlightened, we may know what is the hope to which God has called us. The One who entered God’s world as the least of these is the One whom we embody. The One who suffered, died and is risen reigns in us and our world, albeit that reign often obscured and ignored. The One who is ever breaking in by feeding, welcoming, clothing, caring, visiting comes to all in exile and brings us home to self and God.