

Worship @ Home

Sunday 22nd November 2020

Christ the King

Sheep or Goat? Or a little bit of both...?



Worship Leader: Revd Val Reid

Reader: Anne Blackman

Music: Andy Searle, Toby Scott, Rob Bryan, Lisa Morgan

Technician: Tony Edmonds

Call to worship

We have been called into the pastures of God,
where there is nurture, a place to rest,
safety, and kindness among all.

Let us draw near, in the goodness of God,
to be with each other,
and to praise the shepherd who has gathered us here.

Amen.

Music – Singing the Faith 264

Make way, make way for Christ the King
In splendour arrives
Fling wide the gates and welcome Him
Into your lives

He comes the broken hearts to heal
The prisoners to free
The deaf shall hear, the lame shall dance
The blind shall see

*Make way! (Make way!)
Make way! (Make way!)
For the King of kings
(For the King of kings)
Make way! (Make way!)
Make way! (Make way!)
And let His kingdom in*

And those who mourn with heavy hearts
Who weep and sigh
With laughter, joy and royal crown
He'll beautify

We call you now to worship Him
As Lord of all
To have no gods before Him
Their thrones must fall!

Graham Kendrick

Let us pray

God, we have been a scattered people,
roaming, looking for places to call home.
You have called us home, gathered us in,
given us a land of belonging where all are welcome.
You have sought us out, brought us in
and held us in this great story.

So we come to you,
people who are hungry,
people who are thirsty,
strangers, imprisoned, exposed,
knowing that you have come to us, too,
in these same guises.

In our brokenness, welcome us.

And open up our defences as we come to you,
O Lord of many guises.

Amen

Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24

For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them 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. 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.

Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

Let us pray

Yours is the earth and all that is in it.
The valleys, mountains, seas and rivers;
the land, the pastures, the trees and flowers.
All around us, we see stories of your bounty,

your exuberant goodness, your flourishing provision.
You have made us to live here,
nurtured by this earth, and by our work.
We find joy in this vocation, to be your people,
living, working, resting, supporting.
We thank you for the gifts of living,
and for these gifts of bounty all around us.

Show us how to share all this glorious earth,
How to be generous,
How to stop pushing with flank and shoulder,
How to step back from butting the weak
Just because we can.

We too will seek the lost,
and we will bring back the strayed,
and we will bind up the injured,
and we will strengthen the weak.
Help us, Lord.
For this is your work.
Amen.

Matthew 25: 31-46 (from 'The Message')

1-33 "When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne. Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out, much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats, putting sheep to his right and goats to his left.

34-36 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what's coming to you in this kingdom. It's been ready for you since the world's foundation. And here's why:

I was hungry and you fed me,
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.'

37-40 "Then those 'sheep' are going to say, 'Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?' Then the King will say, 'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.'

41-43 "Then he will turn to the 'goats,' the ones on his left, and say, 'Get out, worthless goats! You're good for nothing but the fires of hell. And why? Because—

I was hungry and you gave me no meal,
I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,
I was homeless and you gave me no bed,

I was shivering and you gave me no clothes,
Sick and in prison, and you never visited.'

⁴⁴ "Then those 'goats' are going to say, 'Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or homeless or shivering or sick or in prison and didn't help?'

⁴⁵ "He will answer them, 'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, that was me—you failed to do it to me.'

⁴⁶ "Then those 'goats' will be herded to their eternal doom, but the 'sheep' to their eternal reward."

Prayer of confession

Let us pray.

Truly, we say to you that we have seen the broken
and have not been moved to compassion.

Truly, we say to you that we have heard people mourning
and have not given them our time.

Truly, we say to you that we have witnessed oppression
and have not raised our voices.

Truly, we say to you that we have seen the stranger
and not said a word.

God, hiding in all strangers, all around us,
we are truly sorry for what we have done,
and what we have not done.
And we ask you to deepen your welcome in us,
so that we might deepen our welcome around us.
Amen.

Reflection

I'm so glad I'm not a member of Matthew's church.
I can imagine he'd be an inspirational preacher.
And a charismatic leader.
But oh dear – his theology is not exactly open, is it?
He's so certain.
So judgemental.
Sheep and goats.
Eternal life or eternal punishment.
It's very polarising.

I've lost count of the number of sermons I've heard – and indeed preached – on this iconic passage.
And all of them have much the same message.

Pull your socks up.
Stop being so selfish.
Get out there and be nice to people.
Otherwise you know where you'll end up!

But you won't be surprised if I say that I don't think it's that simple.

I remember a story that Brian Beck told us when I was a theological student.
In John Wesley's day, one of the key taxes was a tax on silver.
It was aimed at the middle and upper classes, who obviously had a good collection of silver plates, cutlery and ornaments.
And, as we know, people are very good at hiding their assets to minimise their tax.
In the last year alone, HMRC received 73,000 whistleblowing reports of tax evasion in the UK.
Things weren't very different 250 years ago.
So when the inspectors came to visit John Wesley, they assumed he was hiding his silver collection as part of a tax avoidance scheme, and wrote severely to him.
He replied:
I have two silver spoons at London and two at Bristol.
This is all the plate I have at present, and I shall not buy any more while so many round me want bread.

This was told to us naïve theological students as an example of John Wesley's social conscience.
We should go and do likewise.

Well, yes.
I take his point.
Of course, we should all aspire to live simply so that all may simply live.

But what are the criteria by which we will be judged?
Two silver spoons in Bristol and two in London?
Couldn't Mr Wesley have managed with just one in each house?
Or perhaps he could make do with pewter?
And why did he have two houses anyway?

The problem with Matthew's dramatic judgement day scenario is that it is so black and white.
Reality is a little more complicated.

So let's have a look at this story, in its context, and try to unpack some helpful approaches to how to live like sheep.

Because, first of all, this passage comes at the end of a series of parables which seem to be about the last judgement.
But actually, they are less about what will happen on judgement day, and more about how we live now.
Matthew believed in an imminent Parousia.
Jesus would come again to judge the quick and the dead.

In fact he was already a tad late in his return to earth.
So the likelihood was that he would turn up at any moment.
What would he find?

Two weeks ago in the lectionary we had the parable of the twelve bridesmaids.
Six with plenty of oil for their celebratory lamps.
And six without a back-up.
Now the six wise bridesmaids with spare oil can come across as unpleasantly smug.
And rather selfish – why couldn't they share their supplies with their six sisters?
But the point is that the bridegroom was delayed.
Just as Matthew's church believed Jesus had been delayed in his coming again.
What are we doing while we wait?
Are we prepared and resourced to keep on with the life of faith?
Or have we given up?

And last week it was the parable of the talents.
The master is away.
For a long time.
Again, the question is: what will we do with our resources in his absence?

For Matthew, the coming judgement is important because it governs how we act now.
In the gap between this flawed and fallen world, and the values of God's kingdom.
What do we do with our time, our money, our talents?
How do we live here and now?

But secondly, this passage also sits in a historical context.
The image of sheep and shepherds would be a familiar one to those listening to Jesus.
And to the primarily Jewish converts reading Matthew's gospel.
The sheep are the people of Israel.
And, traditionally, good rulers are good shepherds.
That's why Jesus borrows that image to describe himself, the archetypal good shepherd.

In our reading from Ezekiel, the prophet is warning the people of Israel that they are behaving selfishly.
The strong sheep are butting the weak ones out of the way in order to grab all the best pasture for themselves.
So God will send them a good shepherd – a king – who will reassert justice in the land.

I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

Now that's an important image.
But just think about it for a moment.
David was indeed an archetypal figure.
The shepherd boy who became King.

But if you think a bit more closely, David wasn't exactly 100% good shepherd.
Yes, he united the warring tribes of the covenant people, and made Israel great again.
But he was also a serial womaniser and sexual predator.
The Donald Trump of ancient Israel?

But in one important way he was very unlike Donald Trump.
He was willing to listen when he was confronted with the truth.
He was willing to say sorry.
He was willing to change.

Most of us are neither perfect king, nor vicious sinner.
Neither wise nor foolish bridesmaids.
Neither diligent nor completely risk-averse servants.
Neither sheep nor goats.
But, like David, we are a bit of both.

We want to act ethically and kindly, but we don't always get it right.

Because in Matthew's story both sheep and goats are bemused by the retrospective criteria:

*Master, what are you talking about?
When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink?*

Did we really just not see it?

The problem is, we are living in a fallen world.
However careful, however generous, however charitable we are as individuals, we are part of a global system that is horribly wrong.
Just this week microplastics have been discovered at the top of Everest.
And we discovered that the UK had sourced PPE from Chinese factories using Korean slave labour.
Just by being alive, we are complicit in all of this.
We are well and truly goats.

So how do we respond?
Should we just give up, because there is no way we can keep ourselves ethically pure in a compromised world?
Or should we over-compensate by never giving ourselves a break?

In John Wesley's sermon 'on visiting the sick', he urged his wealthy congregation to go and visit the poor and the ill in their area.
Not because he thought it would do the sick people good, particularly.
But because if we don't look into the eyes of the other person, they remain a statistic on a page, rather than a human being made in God's image.

For me, one of the important messages in the parable of the sheep and the goats is that we are called to recognise Christ in the people who are hungry, thirsty, sick or in prison.

They are not just numbers.

Not just faceless statistics.

They are people.

When the government creates a hostile environment for migrants and refugees, we need to remember that they are real people, with real lives and real relationships.

When Donald Trump labels Mexicans as drug dealers, criminals and rapists, we need to remember that no – they are human beings.

When Boris Johnson resists extending food vouchers for families during the school holidays because parents should be budgeting better, we need to remember each hungry child.

I think this applies to our local community activities.

And to our involvement in national – and international – politics.

It applies to our choices about where we shop, and how much we are willing to pay for fair trade.

It applies to how much effort we are willing to put in to recycling and reducing our carbon footprint.

The effects are always on people.

Real people.

We can't solve the problems of the whole world.

We won't always get it right.

If we are honest, we are all a bit of sheep, a bit of goat.

But we can notice when we get it wrong.

We can say sorry.

We can change.

How we live in the gap between where we are now and where we wish we were – that still matters.

And that is what this passage is all about.

It matters how we treat our fellow human beings.

It matters that we hang on to God's values, even if we can't always put them into practice.

It matters that we apply our minds and our hearts to the business of discerning how to do good in this world.

Step by step.

Choice by choice.

Vote by vote.

And, finally, it matters that in the end God will put right all the hurt we have inflicted, untangle all the mess we have created, and enfold in God's love all people, everywhere.

We will not be defined by our failures.

We will be defined by how much God loves us.

And God's love is infinite.

Amen.

Music – StF 251

Jesus Christ is waiting,
Waiting in the streets;
No one is his neighbour,
All alone he eats.

Listen, Lord Jesus,
I am lonely too.
Make me, friend or stranger,
Fit to wait on you

Jesus Christ is raging,
Raging in the streets,
Where injustice spirals
And real hope retreats.

Listen, Lord Jesus,
I am angry too.
In the Kingdom's causes
Let me rage with you.

Jesus Christ is healing,
Healing in the streets;
Curing those who suffer,
Touching those he greets.

Listen, Lord Jesus,
I have pity too.
Let my care be active,
Healing just like you.

Jesus Christ is dancing,
Dancing in the streets,
Where each sign of hatred
He, with love, defeats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I should triumph too.
Where good conquers evil
Let me dance with you.

Jesus Christ is calling,
Calling in the street,
"Who will join my journey?
I will guide their feet."
Listen, Lord Jesus,
Let my fears be few.
Walk one step before me;
I will follow you.

John Bell and Graham Maule

Prayers for ourselves and others

Using 'Ubi Caritas' as a response after each bidding for prayer (StF 783)

Let us pray.

I invite you to close your eyes, and make a prayer pilgrimage in your imagination.

Start with your own home.

Who lives here?

Are you on your own?

Are there others who share this space?

What do they need?

What do *you* need?

What can you offer?

Silence...

Ubi caritas et amor, Ubi caritas, Deus ibi est, (Where there is charity and love, God is there)

In your imagination, walk out of your front door.

What do you see?
Who lives in this street?
Do you know any of your neighbours by name?
What do they need?
What can you offer?

Silence...

Ubi caritas et amor, Ubi caritas, Deus ibi est, (*Where there is charity and love, God is there*)

In your imagination, rise up above your street.
In our imaginations, we can fly!
Look out over the town of Hitchin.
Can you see the estates?
The parks?
The market?
The many churches?
The shops that are open.
The pubs that are closed.
The food bank.
The man who is sleeping in a doorway.
The woman who is walking on her own.
What does our community need?
What can you offer?

Silence...

Ubi caritas et amor, Ubi caritas, Deus ibi est, (*Where there is charity and love, God is there*)

And now fly higher still.
Imagine you are in the space station, orbiting the earth.
Can you see our beautiful, fragile planet, floating in space?
Can you see the forests, the mountains, the oceans?
Can you see the clouds of smoke, the plastic drifting in the rivers, the barren patches where trees have been felled?
What does our eco system need?
What can you offer?

Silence...

Ubi caritas et amor, Ubi caritas, Deus ibi est, (*Where there is charity and love, God is there*)

Come back to your sofa, your living room, your kitchen – wherever you are.
Think back on your prayer pilgrimage.

There is so much need out there.
So much to do.
Always more than we have time, or energy, or resources to offer.
Yet we do what we can.
One small thing at a time.
Each moment of prayer, each kind word, each generous action, each thoughtful choice, is an investment in God's economy.
Because where there is charity and love, God is there.

Ubi caritas et amor, Ubi caritas, Deus ibi est, (Where there is charity and love, God is there)

Lord's prayer

I invite you now to say the Lord's prayer out loud.
Use whichever version you are familiar with.
Use whichever language feels like your mother tongue.
Although we are apart, we join together in praying the prayer that Jesus gave us.

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.

Blessing and sending out

O God of kindness,
send us out with more time for interruptions,
and more generosity for kindness,
so that we might see you
within these walls and beyond these walls.
Amen

Music - STF 547

Beyond these walls of worship
In the stress and joy of life,
Can we offer you our bodies
As a living sacrifice?
Will we keep you at the centre,
Far beyond the Sunday call?
Will we turn to you, be transformed by you;
Still declare you God of all?

Beyond these walls of worship
In the times of work and rest,
Will we display your love for all
When our faith's put to the test?
When the people that surround us
Deny that you are there?
Will we display our faith in you –
In life, in praise, in prayer?

Beyond these walls of worship
May your Spirit strengthen us
To make the whole of life our worship
As we witness to your love.
From this moment in your presence,
Send us out now to proclaim
That we'll live our life as a sacrifice,
To the glory of your name.

Ian Worsfold and Paul Wood

*Some prayers are taken from 'Roots for Churches' 22/11/20
CCL 7011*