

## Sermon - Participating in the kingdom of the King

Based on Ezekiel 34.11-16, 20-24, Ephesians 1.15-23 and Matthew 25.31-46 (NRSV)

### BBQ or curry?

- As we celebrate the feast day of Christ the King, the gospel passage for this year is the parable of the sheep and the goats.
- I was talking to my siblings yesterday, and discussing the idea of establishing a church tradition whereby we would always have a parish meal on this day, and serve goat.
- Some one thought that both mutton and goat meat should be served, and then my younger brother suggested that parishioners could have a choice of either BBQ'd lamb or curried goat, and divide themselves according to their choice.

### The fat and the lean

- Jokes aside, it seems as though Jesus was referencing the Old Testament reading from the prophet Ezekiel.
- Ezekiel describes God's people as sheep - a familiar metaphor.
- But he goes further, and distinguishes between fat sheep and lean sheep.
- The fat sheep are those who exercise power to bully the others, and to take all they want for themselves.
- Whereas the lean sheep are those who suffer from injustice, and are disconnected and cut off from the flock and from good pasture.
- Ezekiel speaks the word of the Lord into their situation, and he describes the Lord as a shepherd, seeking, rescuing, bringing them, feeding them, binding up the injured, and strengthening the weak.
- Ezekiel tells of God's self-giving love for his people - especially for those who need that encouragement, care, and blessing.
- He ends this passage by naming his servant David - that is, king David - who, even as a prince, is yet a shepherd to God's people.
- There is a very clear connection made between the Lord stating that he will be a shepherd to his people, and then clarifying that he will effect this by putting David over them to shepherd them.
- The other point to realise is that Ezekiel is not referring to David himself, but rather meaning a king from the house of David - that is, one of David's descendants.

### David shepherd prophecy fulfilled

- So returning to the Gospel story, in which Jesus tells the parable of the sheep and the goats, we can see the similarity between the description of the lean sheep, and the fat sheep.
- It's not exactly the same, because Ezekiel's division is between those who *perpetrate* injustice, and those who *experience* injustice.
- And Jesus' parable is about those who *attend* to injustice - the sheep, and compares them to those who *ignore* injustice - the goats.
- Now there are a number of observations to be made about Jesus' story, in the light of both the readings from Ezekiel and from Ephesians.
- In Ezekiel, the Lord says he will enact justice through his servant King David - or at least, through his descendant.
- Then Paul, writing to the Ephesians, describes Jesus Christ as having been seated beside God's throne in heaven, with all authority being given to him.
- We know that Jesus was born as a descendant of David, and so Ezekiel's word of the Lord is made manifest in Jesus himself.
- In Jesus we have the Lord tangibly shepherding his people, just as Ezekiel has described.

## Sermon - Participating in the kingdom of the King

### We shepherd too

- Now we can take that further, because this becomes relevant for us, as Christians - as followers of Christ.
- Jesus explains in his parable that when we are actively providing:
  - the hungry with food,
  - the thirsty with something to drink,
  - the stranger with hospitality,
  - the naked with clothing,
  - the sick with healing, and
  - the prisoners with friendship -
- then we are manifesting the kingdom of heaven through our actions, and are putting into effect the Lord's promise to shepherd his people.
- I see a direct connection between the Lord saying that he will be a shepherd, and then naming David - or a descendant of David - as doing that shepherding, and then that descendant, that is, Jesus, naming those who respond to the needs of those around them as participating in those actions of shepherding.

### Judgement as truth

- Now I want to look at the concept of judgement.
- I know that the Gospel passage doesn't use the word judgement, but we understand that the action of separation to be effected through the Son of Man making judgement.
- The first aspect of judgement to understand is that it's about discernment - discerning the truth of a claim, or allegation, or accusation.
- A judge is supposed to strictly focus on the facts and arguments presented in order to ascertain and determine the truth of a situation.
- Judgement is about discerning the truth.
- So when we come before Jesus, we come before someone who discerns what is true.
- And for me, there is a very simple way that this is achieved.
- Through light.
- Jesus is sometimes described as the light of the world, because in his presence the divine reality, what is fundamentally true, can be readily seen.
- When we are in the dark, or in a dim space, then any dirt on our clothes is easily overlooked.
- We might be quite dirty and shabbily dressed, and it wouldn't be noticeable.
- But when the light is shone on us, we can easily become embarrassed because of what is revealed.

### Judgement as light

- I believe that this is the judgement.
- It is standing in the light of Christ, and seeing easily for ourselves where we are not as clean and as well presented as we thought we were.
- Jesus says that when we have the bright light of God's justice shone on us, then it will become very apparent, quite visible, to ourselves whether we have attended to injustice, or not.
- I think that Jesus won't be separating the sheep from the goats directly himself.
- Rather, that the sheep, in the brightness of the light of God, will see for themselves how they have participated in the Lord's shepherding of his people, and will be drawn towards that divine brightness.
- And I believe that the goats, also in the brightness of the light of God, will see for themselves how they have avoided participating in the Lord's shepherding.

## Sermon - Participating in the kingdom of the King

- That this will be like a dirty stain on their clothing, and in their embarrassment will want to hide and conceal it, and thus be drawn to the darkness where it will not be as visible.
- For me, understanding the division between the sheep and goats in this way then fits in better with the verse from John's Gospel, where Jesus says: *'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'* (John 3.17)
- Because I believe that Jesus is not into condemning people, and yet we have a story of the sheep being divided from the goats, so it makes sense to me that this kind of division is effected through people either being drawn into the light, or wanting to hide from the light.
- They are effectively dividing themselves through their own actions.

### 3rd kingdom of heaven story

- The other aspect to note about this story is that it is the third in a sequence of stories that Jesus tells to describe the kingdom of heaven.
- The first is the parable of the bridesmaids, with five wise ones who, due to their preparations, get to attend the wedding and enjoy the wedding feast, compared to the five foolish ones who miss out on the wedding and the feast.
- Simply put, it's about those who, through their behaviour, get to participate in the kingdom of heaven on earth - or not.
- The second story is of the servants, or slaves, who have generously been given wealth in the form of talents, and some of them put these talents to beneficial use and are able to enjoy the multiplied blessings, while another servant hides his talent so that no-one benefits from it - not even himself.
- Again, the story is simply about those who, through their behaviour, get to enter into the joy of participating in the kingdom of heaven on earth - and the one who doesn't.
- And so, similarly, we have the third story today, about those who attend to any of the different forms of injustice, and in so doing, find that they have been engaging directly with the king of heaven, and responding to him.
- And, of course, those who have avoided addressing any need or injustice, and consequently not engaged with the king of heaven, and not served him.
- And so, again, this story is likewise about those who, through their behaviour, find themselves participating in the kingdom of heaven on earth - or not.

### Our hope

- Paul, writing to the Ephesian Church, reminds them - and us - of the hope to which we are called.
- I believe this hope to be that of experiencing and participating in the kingdom of heaven, in which Jesus, our Lord and teacher, has been placed in authority, and who, in this position as King of kings and Lord of lords, calls us to enact, and make manifest, his kingdom.
- To him be glory, for ever. Amen.