

Personal Service 22 November 2020

Hail to Christ, the King,
born to be first witness to God's truth,
whose might lies in mercy,
whose throne is placed in the midst of humble people...

Dorothy McRae-McMahon, *Liturgies for High Days*

StF 34/ HP 505 O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness

Prayers of approach and confession:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...Loving God, we do not find it easy to trust in your care and your faithfulness. Help us to find space and quietness in our minds and hearts in this moment, space to lay down our burdens and distractions, and to welcome your healing presence and your refreshment.

[Silence]

Creator God, you have set us to live in a world full of wonder, of diversity of people and all living things. Help us to know you afresh in the responsibility you have given us to care for one another and for our planet. Thank you for all your gifts, for the capacity for growth and development, for forgiveness and justice, that you have planted within us.

[Silence]

We confess that we have been self-centred, and have looked to our own interests before those of others. We ask for your healing and your restoring touch to call us back to life.

We hear again the words of Jesus, 'Go in peace, your sins are forgiven'.
Amen. Thanks be to God.

Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24

Matthew 25: 31-46

StF 711/ HP 556 Pray for the Church, afflicted and oppressed

Reflection

This is the Sunday before Advent - the Feast of Christ the King, to give it its proper title! The image of the king is problematic in modern Western democracies, but there are plenty of powerful kings in the Old Testament and in the parables of Jesus. There are also plenty of sheep, especially in the prophets Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel, (and some goats). There are

shepherds, good and bad, and the image of the king as shepherd of his people is a pervasive one throughout the ancient Near East. The figure of King David, the shepherd King, represented the glory days for Israel, and they longed for a leader who would carry on the tradition.

Ezekiel is writing during the sixth century BC, and this part of his work dates from after the capture and destruction of Jerusalem, when he and many other inhabitants of Jerusalem have been taken into exile in Babylon. Much of Ezekiel's writing is gloomy, but this section speaks of the hope of return and restoration. God himself becomes the shepherd. In contrast to the recent kings of Israel and Judah, who have looked only to their own enrichment and have neglected the people, God will care for his people. 'I will seek out my sheep' and 'I will feed them with justice' (NRSV). References to 'clouds and thick darkness' echo the encounter with the presence of God on Mt Sinai, and we are back with the story of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, a journey of hope and liberation. This shepherd/ God is going to bring the humiliated exiles to freedom; he will gather in all his sheep - the scattered peoples of the Northern Kingdom as well as the exiles of Judah. This compassionate shepherd will bring the sheep to a place where the hungry will be fed, the thirsty watered, the injured cared for.

But Yahweh the shepherd paints a stark picture of persistent human greed and injustice - the sleek, fat, prosperous (fill in according to taste!) who bully the weak and disadvantaged will get their comeuppance. God will intervene on behalf of the weak - this is not a detached, disinterested God, but a God whose love and compassion drive him to seek out his beloved people and bring them to a place of freedom and rest. In the tradition of the ancient Near East, kings were expected to care for their subjects and act justly towards the most vulnerable in society - the widows and orphans, the poor and infirm. How a society behaves towards its most disadvantaged members demonstrates its true values. How government policies affect the elderly, the disabled, the homeless, the sick, asylum seekers, prisoners, involves each one of us.

The author of St Matthew's gospel is writing to a Christian community in the last third of the first century AD, a time of cataclysmic events for the Jewish people, the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans and the destruction of the Temple (AD 70), a time of brutality and starvation, according to the Roman historian Josephus. It was a time of terror and persecution, when the very sense of Jewish identity was under threat, and perhaps, for some in the young Christian community, Christian faith itself was also. The

writer gives us two stories about waiting and being prepared, and also about the decisions we make, about judgement. The latter comes to the fore in the last situation, the picture of a shepherd dividing sheep and goats. This exposition of the Son of Man as judge of all people challenges our choices, our values. What is our view of human life and its purpose? Who matters? Too often we hear statements that draw a distinction between us and 'the other', 'them', whether that be migrants, asylum seekers, people on benefits, Muslims, or any other group of people who are not 'us'. We are shown in this story that God's judgements are not like ours. Both groups are unprepared for the standard of judgement involved. The judge does not explain himself, but there are obvious echoes of the Law and the Prophets, especially Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. God's criteria and expectations are mercy, compassion, kindness and practical generosity that demonstrate human solidarity.

As human beings, we are good at self-deception; we mostly push aside the consequences for others of the way we live, for example, in the West's insatiable demand for natural resources found in developing countries; commercial exploitation often damages the local environment and the well-being of local communities. God's judgement has a human face, the face of one tortured and crucified. We know what the poor, the neglected, the imprisoned in our world need (or we might if we asked them, but the powerful usually do not).

If we put ourselves alongside the disadvantaged and the powerless, we are aligned with them in solidarity as human beings. If we are to keep the language of 'Christ the King', we must try to make sure that we are not consigning him to some safe area of our imagination, sitting on a throne, untouchable, with a crown on his head and lots of angels with golden wings.

We shall find him with real human beings, with suffering bodies and souls, with people like us who know what it is to need forgiving and the chance to change and live again.

Prayers of intercession:

Gracious God, we pray for our world and all its peoples, created in your love and likeness, and for communities of faith throughout the world. We give thanks for all witness to the power of love and self-sacrifice. We

remember those communities who are under threat because of their culture and ethnicity.
Lord, have mercy.

Loving God, we pray for those living in parts of the world where there is war and civil conflict, for Syria, Yemen, Palestine-Israel. We remember children who are growing up with violence as the norm in everyday life, where they are not getting the education they need. We pray for girls and women across the world, in places where they are treated simply as objects for the use of men, suffering physical and emotional abuse.
Lord, have mercy.

God, we pray for our world as we all live with Covid-19, remembering especially those whose lives are already precarious, and have become more so at this time. We give thanks for doctors, nurses and all front-line workers, for researchers, and those working to produce vaccines.
Lord, have mercy.

God, we pray for all governments, remembering the people of the United States in a new situation. We pray for wisdom for those who take decisions which affect the lives of millions, in national and international bodies.
Lord, have mercy.

We remember all those known to us who are sick or anxious or sorrowing. Grant them the grace of your presence and your peace.
We offer our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

StF 347/ HP 255 Crown him with many crowns

May the God of all ages, who is the ever-young
bless, inspire and warm you.
May the risen Christ, a living mystery among us,
burst the tombs which deaden you.
May the Spirit, who is the dance of life,
be your companion and guide,
now and always.

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