

Today is the first Sunday before Advent, the feast of Christ the King. Despite the lockdowns and despite not being able to gather in person for so much of this year, we have still followed his story. We have followed his story from the promise of his coming, his birth at Bethlehem, his childhood and baptism by John. We have followed his signs and wonders. His call to his Apostles. His ministry of truth, love and reconciliation. We followed Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem and the events of Holy Week. We have seen the lonely figure on the cross and rejoiced with the disciples at his resurrection. We have witnessed his ascension and celebrated the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The pandemic had been awful and has impacted on all of us in so many ways, but it hasn't stopped our faithful remembrance of the life, death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. So as we celebrate Christ the King, we recognize that Jesus is the anointed Son of God, King of all kings.

The celebration of the Feast of Christ the King is the fulcrum of the liturgical year. The baby whose birth we await in Advent, is now the King upon the throne of heaven. Next week, Advent begins, and we start to look forward to coming close to the mystery of Christmas, anticipating the celebration of Christ's birth. But this Sunday is also known as 'stir-up Sunday'. Traditionally, we should all be making our Christmas cakes and puddings. But stir-up Sunday is also about Christ stirring up inside us a holy disquiet. It's a time for thinking about Jesus, the king who reigns over heaven and earth, whilst also thinking about Jesus the king who will come again at the end of time. We are stirred up by this paradox of living in the now and the not yet. We catch glimpses of the kingdom in the present while we anticipate the kingdom that is to come. But what will that kingdom look like?

In Mathew's Gospel, Jesus tells parables to give us a flavour of what to expect. Jesus describes the kingdom as being like a mustard seed or as yeast. Something humble that can be transformed by God into something great and life changing. Or like something small but incredibly precious like a perfect pearl. Jesus describes a kingdom that may not always appear fair by worldly standards. Jesus tells us that people who assume that they have a place in heaven will be shut out, and those who don't think they are worthy will be welcomed with open arms. Those who are least important find they are the most important. All glimpses of the upside-down nature of the kingdom of God.

Jesus also tells us that kingdom is not a fortress entered by those who want to keep themselves safe. It is entered by those who are prepared to take a risk, to risk everything for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. The kingdom isn't governed by a tyrant who demands and enforces obedience. He tells us that the people who don't get in, are those who *choose* not to get in. Those people who reject or ignore the generous invitation that is offered to everyone through God's Son, Jesus Christ.

Then we get to the bit in today's gospel about the sheep and the goats. Compared to all the parables that Jesus told about pearls, leaven, mustard seed or farmers

sowing seeds, it seems like a very definite judgement. Jesus appears to be saying that everything is either black or white. You are either a sheep or a goat. Good or bad with no grey areas or nuance. This worried me, because although I think there are times when I think I am a sheep, there are also times when I know that I am a goat. I do have days, they might not be very often, when I am 'good' and that my life is honouring to the call that Jesus has on my life. But there are definitely days when I do or say things that would earn me a place in the goat category! I think I am, and perhaps we all are, a mixture of sheep and goat. Or perhaps there are times in our lives where our circumstances and experiences mean that we are more sheep or more goat. There have been times when I've fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger and visited the prisoner. But there are other times when I have avoided the stranger and walked on the other side of the road when faced with someone who needed help. So where does that leave me? And how can anyone of us know if our 'good sheep tally' is high enough to be declared wholeheartedly as a sheep?

Elsewhere in the Gospel, Jesus is very clear that judgement is not up to us, but is God's privilege. So it would seem a bit odd if this story is about providing us with a formula to apply to ourselves. Rather, I think this reading is an encouragement to embrace the qualities of generosity, kindness and self-giving that Jesus embodies. Qualities that will prevail in all the earth when the Son of Man comes as King and all the angels with him. Jesus is encouraging us to have faith in him. To serve others, prompted and sustained by the Holy Spirit. All that we do when we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and free the oppressed is recognized by Christ as service to him. His call is for each of us to serve one another and through that service, serve the one that created each of us. That service is inspired by and sustained by love. We love because God loved us first. To love God is to love what God has made. To love one another is to love the one in whose image we are made. To love others is to recognize the divine image in others and also in ourselves.

God's commandment of love is manifest in action. Jesus the king calls us to serve him by serving others, particularly those who are most in need. This can be hard work, it can be difficult, time consuming and frustrating. But it is also fulfilling and rewarding. We have to be attentive to others' needs, considering others' needs above our own. But it is the same expression of love manifest in action, that Jesus showed all of us when he lived and died amongst us. It is the example of service which he asks us to follow, sustained by faith and the Holy Spirit, so that we are all able to respond to his generous invitation and be present in the kingdom. It is not always easy, but Jesus encourages us to try. And when we try, a little bit of the kingdom is built here on earth.

Amen