

OPENING COLLECT

Eternal Father, whose Son Jesus Christ ascended to the throne of heaven that he might rule over all things as Lord and King: keep the Church in the unity of the Spirit and in the bond of peace, and bring the whole created order to worship at his feet; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

FIRST READING: Ezekiel 34.11–16, 20–24

11 Thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. 12 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. 13 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.

14 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. 15 I myself will

be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. 16 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.

20 Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them:

I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. 21 Because you pushed with flank and shoulder,

and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, 22 I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. 23 I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

24 And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

The prophet Ezekiel was working in the sixth century, when the leading people of Israel were in exile in Babylon, the temple and city in ruins, and the Babylonians were strutting around poking fun at the weakness of their God. Ezekiel spends some time challenging the people to realise that their plight is not due to the weakness of God, indeed he is the ever-present, omnipotent God (see chapter 1), but is due to their failure to be the sort of people God had hoped for. When the people try to blame former generations (“the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge”), he makes it clear that the present generation is just as culpable, and so will be judged (Ezekiel 18). However, in chapter 34, having first accused their kings of poor leadership (they are ‘bad shepherds’), he then gives the people some hope for the future, in this fine passage. Notice that not only will God search them out, lead them home and pasture them, but he will also raise up a ‘good shepherd’ to care for his people, a prince or king, like David, whom Christians, of course, identify as Jesus. Note also that Ezekiel makes it quite clear, elsewhere, that this is not for any merit on their part, but solely ‘for my name’s sake’, and that his purpose may be achieved. No wonder that Jesus, in John, is not only called the Good Shepherd, but also commands Peter, in chapter 21, to “feed my sheep”- the work must go on: the King’s servants must be prepared for anything!

SECOND READING: Ephesians 1.15–23

15 I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason 16

The theme of this last Sunday before Advent is ‘Christ the King’, and our scriptural passage has

I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸ so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you

Epistle continued:

may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. ²⁰ God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²² And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Gospel: Matthew 25.31–46

Jesus said to his disciples: ³¹ ‘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, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ 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; ³⁵ 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, ³⁶ 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.’ ³⁷ 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? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰ 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.’ ⁴¹ 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; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ 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.’

⁴⁴ Then they also will answer,

opened it up. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is our King. This passage from Ephesians is a prayer that the young Christian church may be given the wisdom and the insight to understand the true place of Jesus, whom God has exalted above all,

and may ever rejoice in its newfound life in the Kingdom. From his initial greeting it is clear that the writer has heard good things of the Ephesians, and his prayer is that their life may go from strength to strength. As we celebrate ‘Christ the King’ perhaps our prayer should be that we may be as confident in the faith and as loving ‘towards all the saints’, as were those to whom Paul wrote: that we, and all Christian communities across the world, may be good servants of ‘Christ the King’.

During the last few weeks we have been reading much of Matthew’s record of the ‘apocalyptic’ sayings of Jesus, and dwelt on some of the powerful images which he used (the virgins’ oil and the talents, for example). These were used to bring home the urgency of using our gifts in the service of God and his Kingdom, and being alert to his coming in glory. Perhaps the stark image of this moment, and its strict judgement, is less easy to handle today than it was 50 or 100 years ago, and, certainly, less threatening than it was in the Middle Ages. However, whatever we feel about the second coming and judgement by Christ on his throne, the fact remains that there is a great urgency about living the life of selfless, caring love in a world which is desperate for comfort and hope. But where shall we begin? Well, begin where you are and, as Paul said last week, to the Thessalonians, “encourage one another and build up each other”. A candle on its own gives a feeble light: together we can light the world! Celebrating the kingship of Christ is not ‘triumphalism’ but it is a statement of faith that God is in control, and that serving the King, in love, is the answer to the world’s ills. The passage is a fine challenge to us all to live the life of selfless love, which leads us to the final Collect, though, perhaps, we need to remember that the ‘reward’ is not about wealth and the good life, but the fulfillment of knowing that we are loving and serving God and his mission of love.

Post-Communion Collect:

“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?” ⁴⁵ 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.” ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

Stir up, O Lord, the wills of your faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may by you be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**