

November 22, 2020 - Last Sunday after Pentecost - sermon notes

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

The Reign of Christ

We have arrived at the last Sunday of our liturgical year and what a year it has been. Try to think back to a year ago today. The congregation at Christ Church was celebrating its anniversary and we were looking toward a wonderful year. The year began with a good deal of promise for both congregations and that promise is still with us but has been delayed by an unexpected virus. The world has been changed because of this immense challenge to public health and a good deal of introspection has been conducted over the past 8 months. As we continue in that introspection we do so in the context that this Sunday is called the Last Sunday after Pentecost as well as being known as “The Reign of Christ Sunday”. We celebrate the fact that Christ is King and look toward the day when God’s kingdom comes on earth in the same way as it is in heaven. Scripture holds many hints about what sort of kingdom that will be and, therefore, what sort of kingdom this world can be with Christ in charge. It is quite evident that Christ is not completely in charge in our world but we hold out the hope that when the time comes Jesus will be seen as King and ‘every knee will bend and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father’ (Phil. 2:10,11) The kind of things we are looking forward to are the things spoken of in many sermons I have heard. In fact, those of you who were fortunate enough to be present at Christ Church last Sunday have heard about some of this from Bishop Tom’s sermon but since this topic bears repetition I will cover some of the same ground in this message.

The first hint we get in the Bible about what sort of kingdom it would be if God were in charge is the description of the Garden of Eden. In that place peace and harmony dwelt and God and humanity strolled together in the cool of the evening. There was work to be done in that garden, dominion to be exercised, but with peace and harmony as the wonderful background for that work. That peace was shattered when the creatures who had been given dominion misused that authority and plunged Creation into a period of chaos. The God who made it all prepared a plan to bring the kingdom back under His control and drew from among the human race one family to be the focal point for the long march back to Godly sovereignty. We have rehearsed that story over the past year, both the highs and the lows, as we have done each year through our liturgical schedule. Today we look forward to that day spoken of in the letter to the Ephesians when the plan results in ‘all things being brought together under Christ’ so that once again humanity will have dominion and will exercise that dominion under God’s plan so that once again God will walk with humanity in the garden in the cool of the evening. This is the dream that inspires efforts toward peace and harmony. It is the dream that brings about frustration at the slowness of

people to do what needs to be done. It is the overarching hope that propels the story of God and His people through the pages of scripture into our age and beyond. So, what other things are part of that hope?

Ezekiel speaks of that time in terms of a flock of sheep who have been scattered and abused but are being brought back and cared for by a loving shepherd. The sheep who have been neglected or mistreated will be tended with compassion and mercy and those sheep who have neglected or mistreated others will be judged. Pure water and wonderful pastures will be provided and the scattered sheep will be gathered from all parts of the earth and will be ruled by a descendant of David who will govern in the ways of God. This picture gives comfort to those who mourn or who are hungry now. As I read through this portion of Ezekiel's prophesy I am reminded of the words in the Beatitudes. "Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled..." (Matt. 5:1-11) In the picture Ezekiel paints I see the promises found in the words recorded in Matthew's Gospel. The Reign of Christ will bring about the conditions spoken of in both Ezekiel chapter 34 and Matthew chapter 5. The peace and harmony seen in Eden will be recaptured in the land of God under the rule of the Messiah. I find this a beautiful and captivating picture but not one I see very often outside my door. If we believe that this prediction is true, and I do with all my heart, then it is safe to assume that something will have to be done about the injustice in this world before the beauty of God can be fully experienced. That is where the passage from Matthew chapter 25 comes in .

There is a sifting process described where the sheep are separated into two groups. Everyone from every nation will be brought before the Son of Man and will either move to the left or to the right. I find it very interesting that the judgement described here is based on behaviour and that behaviour, it seems is to spring from our attitude toward others. The sheep who are praised are the ones who have treated other people with love and compassion while the sheep who are judged to be in the wrong are the ones who ignore others. There are no professions of faith or a presentation of a Baptismal certificate although those things are important. What counts in this story is how the sheep have treated each other in the course of their lives. At the centre of this whole idea is the total identification with humanity that we see in the Messiah of God. "When did we see you naked....?" "What you have done to the least of these you have done unto me" is Jesus' answer. In that kingdom of which we dream the King identifies with and understands completely the lives of everyone from the poorest to the richest. This king doesn't seem terribly impressed with status or riches when it comes to deciding which side of the room to move the sheep. The criteria for the decision has little to do with social status - cruel poor people as well as cruel rich people are judged the same. Those who have attended every Church service offered but who ignore

the plight of those around them will join the parade of those destined for the fire. Behaviour as the standard for judgement brings up many questions but with a King who can see into our hearts I have no fear that an incorrect judgement will be made. The ushering in of that time for which we dream requires, it would seem, the separation of those who behave with compassion from those who ignore suffering. The people who will reside within the kingdom to come will be those whose hearts were moved with compassion as they traveled through this age because that behaviour signaled a change in their selfish hearts.

The kingdom of heaven is described as a place of utter beauty, perfect peace, complete fulfilment, and justice for all. The path into that kingdom passes under the eyes of the King of kings and Lord of lords whose compassion and love knows no bounds but whose is very firm about who enters and who doesn't. Our behaviour has a great deal to do with how we will be judged and the best behaviour comes from a restored heart. In fact our best behaviour can only come about from a restored heart - one that has been transformed by the love of God in Jesus Christ. This restored heart is provided by God's Holy Spirit when we allow Jesus to be the ruler in our lives - this is the way things were meant to be. This reality is attested through our baptism but is seen in our changed behaviour toward others. It isn't a matter of accumulating good deeds it is a matter of 'growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2 Peter 3:18)

So what sort of kingdom will it be? It will be a realm that is filled with people who 'do for the least of these'. Filled with people who 'do to others as they would have done to them'. Filled with people whose hearts have been transformed by the indwelling Spirit of God and who have learned to love from the source of all love and all life. I think that would be a beautiful place to live and the chance to 'walk in the garden with God in the cool of the day' sounds wonderful to me. As we bring this liturgical year to a close and prepare our hearts for the season of Advent may we take some time to allow God to show us where we might need to be restored so that when that great and glorious day comes we will be in the line that leads to eternal life. May we encourage those we love to take this decision seriously and not put it off for another day. May we become the story that we tell. The beginning of years are times for resolutions and I invite you to resolve with me to live in such a way as to see the kingdom of heaven on earth as much as possible through our actions and to pray for that day when the 'earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea' (Habakkuk 2:14)

Almighty God, you have made us a royal priesthood in the kingdom of your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ. Make known his victory through us, we pray, that all the world may see his light. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ the Lord. (BAS p. 395)