God – Our Beginning and Destination

You have probably seen the picture of Jesus carrying a lamb or sheep draped over his shoulders. Often, it is in reference to the parable of the lost sheep, the one where the shepherd leaves the 99 sheep in search of the one that is lost.

The vision or concept of God and Jesus as the shepherd who is looking after all of us, their sheep and lambs, is a common one in the Christian story. Which in some ways is a little odd because shepherds in Jesus' day were barely considered human, their voice did not count in public discussion, their testimony was considered untrustworthy in the courts, and they were generally avoided in the marketplace.

On the other hand, there is the beloved King David, who we first meet as the youngest son of Jesse while he is tending the family's flock of sheep. He was a shepherd. He went on to arguably become Israel's most important king even if his behaviour at times did not meet expectations. It is definitely this more positive image of a shepherd that leads our readings today.

It is easy to gloss over this reading where God says, "I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep." (vv11-12) We have heard it many times before.

Consider the context in which this promise is made. God is addressing the people of Judah during their exile in Babylon. It was a period of profound political, social and spiritual crisis. Jerusalem was in ruins and the people evicted. Earlier in the chapter Israel's leaders had been condemned as shepherds who had failed their flock; instead of caring for the people, they exploited them, feeding themselves rather than those entrusted to their care. Looking at leaders around the world, it sounds a little too familiar.

Sheep depend upon their shepherds for food, water, protection and safe grazing. The shepherd was responsible not only to manage the flock but also to ensure its survival and flourishing.

So, God, having witnessed the failure of human leadership, has taken responsibility for the well being of the flock. God is not merely concerned with the spiritual salvation of individuals but also with restoring relationships and with providing all that sustains life.

On Wednesday we begin the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, one of the most painful breakdowns of relationships. It is a reminder that we face a crisis of broken relationships across our communities. This is not God's will for us.

God then promises that the sheep will be reunited and will be fed besides streams in good pastures. It is restoration that connects land, water, food and all creatures. It is a place of security, peace and freedom from fear. It is a vision of shalom where life can flourish. We long for a society where all people can safely walk in the streets, where women and children are safe in their homes.

There is also a warning, as God says, "and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice." (v16)

God will judge between sheep and sheep, addressing those who have benefited at the expense of others. Corruption, abuse of power, all are challenged in this passage. There can be no peace without justice.

The image of the fat sheep pushing aside the weaker ones is a powerful metaphor for economic systems in which powerful interests monopolise land, water and natural resources while marginalised communities bear the costs. Now we are fighting a new challenge! Data centres which will create wealth for the billionaires will guzzle water and electricity which is scarce in so many places.

The Feast of Christ the King was declared as a response to the existential crisis of the First World War, declaring that our allegiance to Christ comes before our allegiance to King or Emperor. The Feast declares that God is greater than our politics.

In addition to the breakdown of human relationships and particularly the issue of gender-based violence, we are living through an ecological crisis of unprecedented scale: climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, deforestation, water scarcity and the destruction of ecosystems. Those most impacted are the most vulnerable communities.

And so, the Gospel reading calls us to act. Our gospel reading from Matthew challenges us to recognise that our treatment of the earth and its ecosystems is inseparable from our treatment of the vulnerable. We are judged on how we have responded to those in need.

"I was hungry and you gave me food." (v35) We share food with those in our immediate neighbourhood through the Food Cupboard and the Magnolia Garden. We share food with those in the wider community through the Food Bank. We can protect the land, restore the soil and care for creations to ensure that people have enough to eat.

"I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink." (v35) Water is essential to all life. Yet rivers, wetlands and aquifers are increasingly threatened by pollution, plastic waste, industrial activity, mining and climate change. We can protect rivers and wetlands to protect human life.

"I was a stranger and you welcomed me." (v35) Floods, droughts, rising sea levels and loss of livelihoods contribute to climate displacement. The displaced farmer, the community forced to leave land that can no longer sustain it, the family whose home was washed away in a flood. Jesus calls us to hospitality rather than fear and exclusion.

"I was naked and you gave me clothing." (v36) This verse challenges the culture of excessive consumption. The fashion industry, for example, contributes to pollution, waste and the exploitation of natural resources and workers. It is a call to share and use responsibly all that the earth provides.

"I was sick and you took care of me." (v36) Air pollution, contaminated water, toxic chemicals, pesticides and plastic pollution contribute to disease. Climate change also increases heat-related illness. Poor communities are often most exposed to environmental hazards, living close to polluted rivers, industrial sites, waste dumps and areas vulnerable to flooding. Will we stand in solidarity and challenge the polluters?

Jesus said, '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." (v40) This is how we serve Christ. This is our destination. Thanks be to the shepherd who guides us and sustains us. Amen.

Readings: Matthew 25:31-46 Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24