

Today is the 22nd November –

it's the Sunday we celebrate Christ the King,
it's Stir up Sunday,
and it's the Church's equivalent of New Year's Eve
for next Sunday is Advent Sunday and the beginning of the church's year.

The festival of Christ the King is relatively new, introduced by Pope Pius XI in 1925

And subsequently adopted by the Church of England.

Note the beginning of our reading from Matthew –

“When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne. Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out, much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats, putting sheep to his right and goats to his left.”

Yes indeed, Christ the King is coming back to claim his rightful throne – and he's coming back in judgement.

Christ the King who has been with God from the beginning of time

John 1 verse 1

“In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God”

Advent Sunday, which is next Sunday, heralds a time of anticipation and waiting.

And it's particularly a time of preparation.

We prepare for Jesus' birth at Christmas and we also prepare for his Second Coming, Jesus' triumphant return.

How different could these two arrivals be?

Jesus' birth was to an unassuming Jewish family, to an unmarried mother,

announced by angels to a bunch of shepherds on a hillside.

Jesus was born, not with great pomp and ceremony as would befit the King of Kings, but quietly, humbly amongst the animals in a stable.

And the idea of a shepherd king isn't new.

David was also a shepherd king and Jesus is a descendant of David's.

We may get obsessed with making our preparations for Christmas – whatever that may look like this year – ensuring we've remembered to send everybody a card, have got presents for everybody, have a fridge and a freezer filled to bursting to cater for every eventuality, even gluten-free vegans, that's if we're allowed to have guests! But are we equally concerned about Jesus' return? After all, we don't know when he's coming and he's coming as judge. He could arrive any time now! Are we ready? Are we prepared?

A couple of weeks ago a vet on TV was doing something unmentionable to the rear end of a white domestic farm animal when Mike walked into the room.

Is that a sheep or a goat, I can't tell, he said.

Thanks, Mike, that's perfect material for my sermon!

Actually, it was a goat!

Sheep and goats, especially in Jesus' time, looked incredibly similar and it was difficult to tell them apart.

The shepherds looked after mixed herds of sheep and goats but they have different needs.

They graze differently and goats are far less robust–

did you know a goat's coat isn't waterproof?

It was necessary to separate the animals at night to give the goats shelter and keep them warm.

Jesus taught using metaphors with which his listeners were familiar – in this case sheep and goats.

But, of course, the outward appearance is irrelevant.

Jesus can tell sheep and goats – people - us - apart

because he can see into our hearts –

there's no pulling the wool over his eyes, if you'll pardon the pun.

This isn't like arriving at Hogwarts and standing in front of the Sorting Hat to learn which house you're in.

It isn't like waiting to see if you're going to be picked for the A or the B hockey team.

This is standing in front of our Lord Jesus to be judged by him.

What's our fate going to be?

Are we going to his right or his left?

Is it eternal life or eternal damnation? –

and you simply can't get more serious than that.

It's a matter of life or death.

This reading from Matthew's Gospel is often called The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats

But it isn't a parable.

It's an eschatological statement –

That's a statement from Jesus himself about the reality of the end times.

This passage comes at the end of a very long discourse when Jesus is taking the final opportunity to teach his disciples while he's on his ultimate journey to Jerusalem.

Jesus had just told the parable of the wise and foolish virgins –

a warning to always be ready, always prepared for the bridegroom's arrival,

Jesus' arrival.

Now Jesus is warning that he's coming back to take his rightful place on the throne –

and he's coming back as judge of all.

Are we ready?

Sheep in Jesus' time followed their shepherd who looked after them, led them to water and good pasture and kept them safe from predators – unlike now when sheep are driven from behind with dogs and even quadbikes.

The sheep trusted their shepherd – they knew his voice.

Goats, unlike sheep, can be independent and strong-willed –

they can do their own thing, go off on their own and the sheep may follow them.

I wonder if we can be led astray by following the goats, the wrong things in our life.

Are we so close to Jesus, the Good Shepherd,
that we can hear his voice, follow him and his example –
is he the one in whom we trust and in whose footsteps we tread?
Do we follow Jesus or are we like goats, doing our own thing, being
independent?
Do we share Jesus' heart of compassion for the poor, the needy, the
marginalised –
after all, they are the people with whom he mixed.
They are the people whose needs he met.

If we're going to be placed on Jesus' right hand with the sheep,
we need to recognise and respond to the needs of those around us.

God knows everything about us.
He knows how we behave and what motivates the choices we make.
He can see into our heart.

Our compassion should become our automatic response.
When we serve others we serve Jesus –
not because of what we're going to get out of it
but because we love others as Jesus loves them.
And we're saved by God's grace –
Grace - God's reward at Christ's expense.
We are justified by faith.

Out of our faith and our love for God we are called to put that love into
action.

That may be a listening ear which brings comfort to those having a hard
time,
particularly at the moment when so many people are feeling isolated and
fearful.

It may be an act of random kindness –
not because our actions make us look good but simply because we love
as Jesus loves
and we respond to human need.

James Martin, a Jesuit Priest wrote recently:

Jesus never said

Feed the Hungry, only if they have papers;

Clothe the naked, only if they come from your country;

Welcome the stranger, only if there's zero risk;

Help the poor, only if it's convenient;

And love your neighbour, only if they look like you.

Jesus demonstrated a life of love in action.

And he calls each of us to live and behave just as he did.

And Matthew reminds us that if we want to find Jesus then we are to look no further than among the harassed and helpless in society and our local community.

This is really challenging and sobering teaching,

I can imagine Jesus' words ringing in his disciples' ears and their reflections afterwards.

Is there a place in our hearts to respond to the needy and homeless or do we simply put our needs first and ignore everybody else?

Last week we heard from Tearfund and this morning we've heard from Simon Peter at the Centre for Urban Mission, where there is great hardship and need.

How can we respond? And it isn't just about giving financially.

It's doing what we can to respond to people's needs – it's being there for people and doing what we can.

If we do respond by giving financially I'm reminded of Matthew 6:3-4,

“But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret.

Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

The importance of generosity and caring for the poor is mentioned frequently

in the Bible –

even last week in our reading from Ruth which our visitor from Tearfund requested

the farmers left the sides of their fields unharvested for widows to glean.

As I said, today is like the church's New Year's Eve –

when we can look back over the past year and reflect on what we've learned about our Lord Jesus and challenge ourselves.

Has our faith deepened and grown?

Has our heart and our behaviour become more Christ-like?

Judgement isn't an easy thing to talk about –

but it's something we're all going to have to face one day.

If we're brutally honest where would we put ourselves?

With the sheep? Or with the goats?

This is really vital teaching –

maybe that's why Jesus left it until last so it would resonate and be remembered.

His disciples would realize just how important it is.

But the good news is that we're going to be judged by our Lord Jesus, who loves us so much he died for us.

As I said, today is also called Stir up Sunday,

the day we traditionally make our Christmas puddings and cakes and invite everybody in our household, our bubble, to have a stir.

But it's called Stir up Sunday because of the opening prayer, the Collect, with which Iain began our service today.

Stir up, O Lord, the wills of your faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruits of good works, may by you be plenteously rewarded.

My prayer is that we'll all be stirred up to reflect back over the year and make a New Year's Resolution to get closer to our Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and to reflect and share his compassionate heart.

And I quote from Graham Kendrick's wonderful song:

Teach me to dance to the beat of your heart
Teach me to move in the power of your Spirit
Teach me to walk in the light of your presence
Teach me to dance to the beat of your heart
Teach me to love with your heart of compassion
Teach me to trust in the word of your promise
Teach me to hope in the day of your coming
Teach me to dance to the beat of your heart

The music we're going to listen to in our time of Reflection is
In Paradisum, In Paradise, from Faure's Requiem.
Which is where I pray we'll all be sheep together one day.

Amen.