

**Sermon for Christ the King 2020, St Andrew's, Chesterton.
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Like the old saying that nothing in life is certain apart from death and taxes, I'm starting to think that I could add another to my life: that I'll be preaching on the feast of Christ the King each year. Out of all the Sundays in the year, over the past few years the small number of times in which I've preached always seem to fall on this Sunday. Is God trying to say something to me, or is this just a reflection of the feast itself, i.e. that preachers avoid it like the plague?

Christ the King is a relatively new feast. Unlike most of the other great feasts in the Christian year which can be traced back to the early church, Christ the King was established by Pope Pius XI in 1925 and spread to many other denominations, including our own Church of England. Pius' papacy was marked by the concept of kingship; he was the first pontiff to be the head of the newly established kingdom of Vatican City in 1929, and his motto was 'Pax Christi in Regno Christi', translated 'The peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ.' The idea that Jesus Christ is a king is a well-established one. The Old Testament prophets and Psalms identified the promised Messiah as being a king; Jesus is said to have been a descendent of David, the king of Israel; and in the most horrific moment of Jesus' life when he was crucified he had the title 'King of the Jews' written above him in Aramaic, Greek and Latin. Why did it take until 1925 for the Church to recognise Jesus' kingly status? I'm told that dear old Pius created the feast in response to the social and political world in which he found himself; the rise of the nation state and vast powerful empires were in the ascendancy in the 1920s, as were the first stirrings of totalitarian regimes which would be a central theme in WW2. Pius was making a big statement: don't put your trust in earthly rulers, but look to Christ as your one true king and leader above all else.

Let's go back to Pius' motto: 'The peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ.' This is a strange statement when you consider it more closely. There is a huge debate within Christianity as to where and what Christ's Kingdom is. Is the Kingdom situated in heaven, beyond our reach and confined to those who have passed away and enjoyed the fruits of the Resurrection? Or are we in God's Kingdom now? Did Christ becoming human in Jesus bring the world into God's reign? How can we explain all the suffering and evil in the world if we believe that we are already in Christ's Kingdom? Is the Kingdom of Christ in fact the Church? Is it that when we all gather, whether physically or virtually, we have come into God's Kingdom and left the earthly kingdom behind for a while? Although our Gospel reading points to sometime in the future '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', many ancient Christians took note of bits of the Bible which suggested the Kingdom is more immediate and is here on earth now. Eusebius of Caesarea, a famous fourth century theologian, equated the fulfilment of Christ's Kingdom here physically on earth as being the reign of Constantine the Great, the first Christian Roman emperor who is largely responsible for the widespread conversion of Europe to Christianity. The peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ?

Kingship and kingdom are, of course, human concepts. We cannot possibly understand God; he is transcendent, outside of creation, completely beyond our comprehension. That's why we need very human ideas, like that of a king, in order to paint a picture of what God could be like. Kings often oversee the law; that's why Christ gives us the image of the final judgement day as being a king separating sheep and goats. But our reading from Ezekiel gives us another powerful human image – that of a shepherd. In our contemporary Western culture, we see a world of difference in the social status between a king and a shepherd. Stand a humble farmer next to the Queen and you probably wouldn't find a great deal to compare. Yet in the Hebrew culture of the Old Testament, the concept of

shepherds and kings were inextricably linked. You'll remember that David was a shepherd before he became king of Israel. This shepherd-king job description is turned into a prophecy in our Ezekiel reading: 'I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.' The shepherd-king image of God tells us a huge amount. Compare it to how human kings have described themselves – Louis XIV of France compared himself to the sun, a powerful, immense being to be feared and respected. The Bible uses imagery which does its utmost to tell us about the power of God, but also to distance him from awful images of totalitarian power. Indeed, the Bible warns us against the false shepherds of our world who delight in using their power and might in unhealthy ways: 'I myself will judge between fat sheep and lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.' This doesn't bode well for those who want to bully, dominate, and crush others to gain status.

Judgement is one of the central themes of our Gospel today, and is one of the most difficult for us to read, unless you are a genuine Mother Theresa or St Francis figure. We are told that one day we will be brought before God on his kingly throne and will be split between being sheep and goats. (I always feel sorry for goats, by the way, as they always get a very bad press). The rationale behind why we'll be split is based on how we have treated other people, especially the vulnerable in our midst. '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, 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.' This calls us to self-reflect honestly: have we done all these things? Or are we like those who do not recognise God's image in the most vulnerable? I don't know about you, but I feel like I've been a goat and a sheep at various different points in my life – indeed, I can't quite figure out which animal I am. This is an extremely serious message, and I think we breeze over it at our peril. If God is like a shepherd, as Christians it is only right that he expects us to reflect something of his shepherdry. In fact, in helping out at the homeless shelter, in giving our time to speak to someone who's lonely, in putting somebody else's feelings before our own, we are making the Kingdom of God present now, immediately here and now! We are to take on the role of shepherd sometimes, helping our fellow human beings through the valleys and dales of life when it is our place to do so, and to be sheep to be shepherded a lot of the time too. If this task of always welcoming another person as if they were Christ sounds tough, it's because it is.

We must not allow this passage to drive us to despair of damnation, although we must read it with a certain degree of fear and trembling. Ultimately, we are being guided by the great shepherd, God, who promises in Ezekiel: 'As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep.' In our prayer life, let us come before God knowing that he is our true shepherd; it's his business to bring about the grace necessary for our salvation, and although like sheep we'll constantly get lost and stray away from what he wants of us, he will find us and bring us back to his fold.

Yes, it is right to describe God as a great king who will judge. But we know that to be a good king the Bible says you need to be a good shepherd, and it is in giving ourselves up to God and saying 'Your will be done' that we hope that he may say to us one day: 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.' Amen.