

Service for Sunday 22 November

The Sunday before Advent, Christ the King

Today is the last Sunday of the year, liturgically speaking. Next week Advent begins. Although it is an end it is really a cycle. We begin next week to prepare to Celebrate Christ's coming and we often think of the coming in glory as part of that. We have thought through the year of Christ's coming, of what the teaching, life, death, resurrection and ascension have meant; how the Spirit enables us, and what that all means for the coming of God's kingdom and we finally reflect on Christ in Glory and what that means for us.

You might like to keep a moments quiet before beginning to read the service.

Call to worship

Come and worship the Lord Jesus,
King of kings, yet servant of all.
Come with your dreams, your longings, your hopes,
and all those on your hearts today,
to seek blessing and healing.

Amen.

A prayer of approach

God of all,
transform and shape us by your love, that:
where we have neglected the needs of others, we may be attentive;
where we have been complacent, we may be active;
where we have shied away from responsibilities,
we may embrace all possibilities
and be mindful of all whom you would have us serve.
For Christ's sake.

Amen.

The Hymn, **Rejoice the Lord is King**, in celebration of Christ the King.

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| 1 Rejoice, the Lord is King !
Your Lord and King adore ;
mortals, give thanks, and sing,
and triumph evermore :
<i>Lift up your heart, lift up your voice ;
rejoice ! Again I say : rejoice !</i> | 4 He sits at God's right hand
till all his foes submit,
and bow to his command,
and fall beneath his feet : |
| 2 Jesus the Saviour reigns,
the God of truth and love ;
when he had purged our stains,
he took his seat above : | 5 Rejoice in glorious hope ;
Jesus the Judge shall come,
and take his servants up
to their eternal home :
<i>We soon shall hear the archangel's voice ;
God's trumpet-call shall sound : rejoice !</i> |
| 3 His kingdom cannot fail,
he rules both earth and heaven ;
the keys of death and hell
are to our Jesus given : | Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

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A gathering prayer

God, we have been a scattered people, roaming, looking for places to call home.
You have called us home, gathered us in, given us a land of belonging where all are welcome.
You have sought us out, brought us in, and held us in this great story.

Amen.

A prayer of praise

Yours is the earth and all in it. The valleys, mountains, seas and spray; the land, the pastures, the trees and fauna. All around us, we see stories of your bounty, your exuberant goodness, your

flourishing provision. You have made us to live here, nurtured by this earth, and by work. We find joy in this vocation, to be your people, living, working, resting, supporting. We praise you for the gifts of living, and for these gifts of bounty all around us.

Amen.

A prayer of confession

Truly, we say to you that we have seen the broken and have not been moved to compassion. Truly, we say to you that we have heard people mourning and have not given them our time. Truly, we say to you that we have witnessed oppression and have not raised our voices. Truly, we say to you that we have seen the stranger and not said a word.

God, hiding in all strangers, all around us, we are truly sorry for what we have done, and what we have not done.

And we ask you to deepen your welcome in us, so that we might deepen our welcome around us.

Christ Jesus came into the world that we might be reconciled to God. The Cross enables our brokenness to be healed; the resurrection offers new life; and Christ's reigning in glory is a seal of that healing and newness and a promise that it will never end. Therefore to all who truly repent, God in Christ says, "Your sins are forgiven." Amen.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

The Collect for the Sunday before Advent

Eternal Father, whose Son Jesus Christ ascended to the throne of heaven that he might rule over all things as Lord: 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 and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

OT Reading Ezekiel 34.11-16, 20-24

¹¹ For 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

Gospel Matthew 25.31-46

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. ³² 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,^[a] 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, ‘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.”

[a] Gk these my brothers

Prayer

Let us pray, God of justice and God of love and mercy, we thank you for these readings. Help, by your Spirit, our understanding and even more our working out the meaning in our lives, especially when that is hard and we have failed in the past. And now as we reflect upon these readings, may the words printed here and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord.

Amen.

Reflection

Although there are the beginnings of signs of hope with the favourable trial results for a number of vaccines, the overwhelming feelings for many in our current situation are still anxiety and fear. Yet we are all aware of acts of love and kindness that have come out during the crisis. I heard of a woman to whom it had to be pointed out that she was providing essential ministry to two people in her community. She thought she was just speaking with and listening to them! They are ‘suffering’ with dementia (is ‘suffering’ the right word?) and are currently cut off from their families and some of the formal care that might have been provided, but this woman is ‘just’ (definitely not the right word!) there for them. To add a great twist to the story, when I sort permission to use this illustration she was surprised –she still hadn’t really got what a wonderful thing she was doing, and did not want her name to be used, because that would be ‘showing off’.

The parable of the sheep and the goats brings the main section of Jesus’s teaching to a close in Matthew’s gospel. With its ‘blessed’ and ‘accursed’ it is reminiscent of the opening of the main teaching –the beatitudes, in chapter 5. It is helpful to have some of the ideas of the Sermon on the Mount in mind as we consider this passage. You may recall some of the new extreme ideas coming out of the ‘old’ such as not just loving those like us but loving enemies. Many of the passages use the form: “you have heard that it was said...”, “but what I say...”. (The former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks described those four words of Jesus as the most surprising.) Here is the traditional teaching of Israel only more so, with a new life giving twist –it is about attitude not law. In those early passages we read how the left hand is not to know what the right hand is doing when we pray or when it comes to giving alms. Acts of love and care and acts of devotion to God

are not to demonstrate to others how great we are, but result because we are alive to God in and around us and to the needs of all God's people.

It is sometimes suggested that this passage (and other judgment accounts) are in opposition to the beautiful thought of St. Paul that 'Salvation is by grace through faith alone', that is we are put right with God not by what **we do** but by **God's love** for us accepted by **our trust** in God. I am aware I will probably say too much and not enough about this theological point and you may well not lose much by ignoring this paragraph! It would be wrong to say they are not offering very different emphasise, but it is to misunderstand both to think they are in opposition. The point about the judgement between the sheep and the goats is not so much the actual actions (although they are not unimportant) but the attitude –the actions are done for the need not for the doers sake, or not done because the potential doer did not see the advantage. The point about faith in relation to grace is not that it is believing the right things (if it were, that is in danger of becoming a work –i.e. I must believe the right thing in order that I may gain something), no it is a response to the love of God.

Those who first heard this parable would have been familiar both with the agricultural setting that gives the metaphor and the many references to sheep, goats and shepherds in (what we call) the Old Testament. Our passage from Ezekiel is one such. Here too we see judgment this time on the false shepherds, the leaders; also described as 'fat sheep' (we use the term 'fat cats'). What is striking here is that it is God who will bring relief (and punishment) revealing the real nature of care and that this will be done through the **one** true shepherd, Prince David. (Interestingly Prince is used here to contrast with the failures of Kings). The Christian eye can not fail to see this as a reference to the coming Christ.

So we see in the Ezekiel passage the nature of the love of God in caring for all people, particularly those in most need and those abused by the powerful, who should be protecting them. That love is to be revealed in the coming Christ. It is that nature of God that indwelling Spirit of Christ, that should be found in us as we see the needs of others (and very definitely not our selfish desires). In the parable Christ is only implicitly present in those who instinctively do care, but is most obviously present (unseen) in those who are cared for. This has been a great source of Christian inspiration. You might like to research this. You could start with St. Francis, St. Martin of Tours and Mother Terrassa of Calcutta. Perhaps there are more personal experience in the 'saints' know to you, rather than these historic figures.

It is not our place to judge! We do not look and say who is a goat and who is a sheep. However it is our place to call out the behaviour of leaders (and would be leaders) who seek to abuse and ride over others rather than to bring care. It is certainly our place to bring relief to those in need and not because it makes us look good but because there in is the Love of God, Christ in us and revelled in those in need.

What are the behaviours and attitudes that God is judging in the world, our country, our community and our relationships? Don't judge the people concerned but add your voice to calling it out. Cultivate that love of God in Christ already in you, so that you may not only see the needs around you but respond to them. What are the specific needs that you might not only respond to but seek the help of your sisters and brothers in responding?

Amen.

Prayers

We give you thanks, loving God, for (*pause as you read each and think of particular examples*):

those who have ministered to us in our time of need; those who have visited us when we were ill; those who have freed us from prisons of fear or lack of confidence; those who have listened when we have needed to talk. Bless them, encourage them in their ministries, and strengthen us to follow their example of self-giving and compassion.

(The following prayers are written with a response; you may wish to read the prayer silently but read the response out loud, or if you are with someone else one of you may like to read the prayer and you both/all join in with the response)

Let us pray, to the Father, with the aid of the Spirit and through Christ, our King.

Christ enthroned in splendour is the head of the Church and so we pray for all Christians everywhere. We pray for leaders, particularly as they judge what is right in following government guidance both as loyal citizens and in care for the safety of the whole community and what might be right to question or challenge that guidance. We pray for Church communities struggling with the lack of physical contact, especially those that fear they may never meet again. But we also give thanks for the many new and extended contacts that on line and other provision has enabled. Christ is the Image: **of the invisible God.**

God promises to feed the sheep with justice. We pray for those in authority. Where there is the abuse of power, people leading for what they can get out of it, riding rough shod over the weakest in society, may that justice come. We pray that all leaders seek humbly to serve and are given your inspiration not only in these difficult times but always. Help us not to judge the individuals. We pray for the needs of our leaders even when we disagree with them and particularly as we call out their unacceptable attitudes and activities. Christ is the Image: **of the invisible God.**

Christ is not only enthroned in splendour; Christ is before us in those in need (and in us to help meet those needs). Open our eyes to the needs of those around us, both literally near to us but also those of whom we hear and read about. There are places of conflict all around, where You, O Christ, lie injured or in fear. There are displaced people all around, where, You, O Christ, exist in dreadful conditions and are abused and risk your life. There are people all around who miss out on the contact they need because of fears of COVID, where, You, O Christ, are alone and in fear and pain. You, O Christ are also there in the ones who visit, listen, bring healing and work for peace. Christ is the Image: **of the invisible God.**

It is not only in strangers' needs that we may have met (or failed to meet) Christ. We pray for those known to us, made in the image of God, and in whom Christ may be seen and served. For those lonely or anxious in these troubled times; for those who are ill; for those who wish to share their rejoicing but feel they cannot; for particular needs that may be known to us. (Pause and bring particular people to mind.) Loving God grant them the ministry they require and may we be aware that we may be the answers to these prayers and serve you in them.

Christ is the Image: **of the invisible God.**

You may wish to read the following rhyming prayer out loud.

**Lord, give us hands to set prisoners free
with hearts that love, and eyes that see
the needs of those who sit alone
and those who wait and those who groan.
Give us feet to go where illness reigns
and words to speak to those in pain;
may we bring hope to everyone
and heal and help through your dear Son.**

**This is our prayer, Lord, hear us now
and guide our path, and show us how
to be your church through thick and thin
with open doors to welcome in
the sheep and goats, the lost and sad,
the rich and poor, the good and bad.
For we're all both, and need from you
huge love and grace to see us through.
Amen.**

We bring these and all our prayers, in the name of Jesus, Christ our LORD. **Amen.**

The Song, **Beauty for brokenness**

1 Beauty for brokenness,
hope for despair,
Lord, in your suffering world
this is our prayer.
Bread for the children,
justice, joy, peace,
sunrise to sunset,
your kingdom increase !

2 Shelter for fragile lives,
cures for their ills,
work for all people,
trade for their skills ;
land for the dispossessed,
rights for the weak,
voices to plead the cause
of those who can't speak.

*God of the poor,
friend of the weak,
give us compassion we pray :
melt our cold hearts,
let tears fall like rain ;
come, change our love
from a spark to a flame.*

3 Refuge from cruel wars,
havens from fear,
cities for sanctuary,
freedoms to share.
Peace to the killing-fields,
scorched earth to green,
Christ for the bitterness,
his cross for the pain.

4 Rest for the ravaged earth,
oceans and streams
plundered and poisoned —
our future, our dreams.
Lord, end our madness,
carelessness, greed ;
make us content with
the things that we need.

Refrain

5 Lighten our darkness,
breathe on this flame
until your justice burns
brightly again ;
until the nations
learn of your ways,
seek your salvation
and bring you their praise.

Refrain

Graham Kendrick (b. 1950)

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Final Prayer

O God of kindness, send us out in Spirit, even as we stay in place, with more time for interruptions, and more generosity for kindness, so that we might see you within these walls and beyond these walls and show your loving kindness. **Amen.**

And the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us now and always. **Amen.**

Material for this service was prepared by Tim Rogers.

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