

THE SHEPHERD KING

EZEKIEL 34:11-16, 20-24; MATTHEW 25:31-46

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

BY: RYAN DUECK

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We've arrived at the last Sunday of the Christian year.

Next Sunday marks the beginning of Advent, the beginning of a new year—a year where time is ordered not by numbers on the solar calendar or the beginning of a new school year, but by the life and work of Jesus.

Many Christians around the world have historically designated this, the last Sunday before Advent as “Christ the King Sunday.” It is a Sunday set aside to once again remind ourselves of Jesus’ lordship over the church, and of where our allegiance finally lies as his followers.

This morning I want us to reflect upon two simple questions on this Christ the King Sunday:

1. What kind of king is Christ?
2. What ought life with this king to look like for those in his kingdom?

These are two simple, but crucially important questions.

Our text from Matthew marks the end of three chapters of nearly unbroken discourse between Jesus and the crowds, Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel, Jesus and his disciples.

And now, in our gospel text today, we come to the final judgment.

Judgment is not a popular word in our culture. There is no greater sin in a culture as individualistic as ours is, than to judge. Indeed, “Who are you to judge me?” could be the slogan of our times.

Personal preference and self-determination are among our most cherished ideals. We are the sun around which everything else orbits, in the twenty first century western world.

We are quite happy for Jesus to welcome us and embrace us as we are, to love and support and sustain us, to bless and guide us, but to *judge* us?

Not for the first time in the gospels—not for the first time in the 3-4 chapters of Matthew that we have been dwelling on this fall!—Jesus does not take our preferences and our assumptions as his starting point. ☺

The first thing we notice is that at the final judgment, those who find themselves on the both the right side *and* the wrong side of the equation are *surprised*.

Those who had offered service to the “least of these” were surprised that this was deemed by the king to be service offered to him!

Those who had neglected to meet the needs of the “least of these,” were surprised to discover that in so doing they had been turning their back on the king himself.

It shouldn't have been a surprise.

God has always been among the weak and the broken.

All the way back in the Torah, there were laws about providing for the poor, the alien, the widow, the orphan.

The prophets of Israel railed against the people for their neglect of mercy and justice and spoke of a time when Israel's king would raise up the lowly and bring down the high and mighty.

Our passage from Ezekiel is an excellent example of this. This, too, is a passage about judgment—judgment of Israel's leaders for being bad shepherds, and judgment for the sheep themselves.

There are a whole string of “I will's” in this passage. Did you notice that?

I will

- **Seek** them out
- **Rescue** them
- **Search**

- **Feed** them
- **Be their shepherd**
- **Make** them lie down
- **Bring back** the strayed
- **Bind up** the injured
- **Strengthen** the weak
- **Destroy** the strong
- **Feed** them with justice
- **Judge**
- **Save** my flock

God has always had a special place in his heart for those the world kicks around, for those far from the halls of power, for those who can't find their way, for those who are often scorned and neglected by others, for those who inhabit the ugly places of the world.

The Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez called this God's "preferential option for the poor."

And now, at the final judgment, Jesus divides the sheep and the goats according to who went to the places where God goes—to the ugly places, in the cracks and the seams where the need seeps and oozes into our world.

Over the past few weeks, we've seen this in a number of different contexts.

A few weeks ago, there was a young couple who slept out front of our church a few weeks back as they were trying to get to Ontario. It was wonderful to see our church rally around them and offer concrete assistance—food, a place to dry off, a hot cup of coffee, a bus ticket to Ontario.

A week and a half ago, when it was brutally cold, I received another call from some people looking for help in finding lodging. They had been evicted from their home and had nothing left. Would we help?

I met with them. I discussed it with a deacon and we decided to put them up in a hotel for a few nights.

Later on, we discovered that they had perhaps been a bit less than forthcoming with us, that there was a long history of addiction and manipulation and foolish use of help offered by various people and agencies in town.

Initially I was frustrated and a bit angry when I heard this. I don't like being taken advantage of and not being told the whole truth.

And then I opened up my bible to prepare for this week's sermon and I read this passage from Matthew 25... ☺

A few weeks ago I went and saw a film called *Calvary*. It is a gripping (and fairly gritty) film, which tells the story of Father James Lavelle an Irish priest in the middle of a storm of sin and suffering in a community that has little use for him or God or the church.

During one scene, he's in the sanctuary talking to a young man who is harbouring some violent thoughts about the commandment not to kill. Father Lavelle says something to the effect of, "Jesus tells us we're not supposed to kill... And there's no asterisk underneath the commandment that says 'except when it's your enemy!'"

I think we could say the same thing about this passage. Jesus says that the King will judge according to how the nations responded to the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned, the *least of these*.

There's no asterisk that says, "But only if they *deserve* help."

There's no asterisk that says, "Feed and clothe and visit those people who demonstrate that they are doing everything they should be to get their lives on track."

There's no asterisk that says, "But only if they're not addicts or liars or cheaters, only if they're reasonably virtuous."

There are no asterisks at all.

The *only* criterion is whether they are in need.

How the king judges is consistent with *what* the king taught and the ways in which the king lived among us.

It's not always easy to know what the best way to respond in our world of need is. But one thing is certain.

As followers of Jesus, we are to constantly be seeking the welfare of those who find themselves in the ugly places of our world.

I recently reviewed a book called *Wading Through Many Voices*, a collection of essays about choosing to allow voices that have historically been ignored into our theological conversations. María Teresa Dávila had a line in one essay that stuck with me. In talking about how we know what we know about God, she says:

Knowledge becomes a matter of location, and location becomes a matter of where we choose to see and ultimately what we choose to love.

The king's judgment of the sheep and the goats could be reduced to the question: Where do we choose to see? What (and who) do we choose to love?

Many people hear passages about judgment like this and instinctively respond with fear.

Jesus' words are hard. And it's easy to look at our own lives and think, "Oh man, I'm not sure I'm doing enough to make it into the sheep side."

On one level, this is an appropriate response. Jesus' words about judgment are meant to jolt us into evaluating how and where we are locating ourselves in the world.

But we are not meant to live in fear of an angry God who's keeping score of how many people we feed and clothe, etc.

We are meant to be participants in a story of love that reaches into the deepest, darkest places of the world.

It was love, not fear, which drove Jesus into these places while he lived on earth. The same ought to be true for us.

God is love and as we read in 1 John 4:18,

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

One thing I am convinced of is this: **We cannot love the way that Jesus loves, we cannot love the people that Jesus loves, we cannot locate ourselves in the places that Jesus located himself unless we actually love Jesus.**

It sounds so obvious, doesn't it?

But, unless we are captivated by Jesus and his way of being in the world, we will not seek to emulate him.

Unless we have been taken hold of by the love that overcomes the darkness and fear of death, we will not seek to demonstrate this love ourselves.

If a genuine love for Jesus himself does not animate all that we are and all that we do, our faith will tend to degenerate into one of two things:

- A cool, detached doctrinal system of beliefs *about* Jesus and what he did (the “conservative” error, broadly construed)
- A grim ethical system that is constantly flogging us on (the “liberal” error)

Both of these options, in my view, will eventually prove unsustainable. They will wither and die because they are not connected to the True Vine.

Unless we love Jesus we will not love like Jesus and we will not draw anyone to Jesus.

I want to close with some beautiful words that I came across this week. These are written by of Richard Beck, a professor at Abilene Christian University in Texas, in a piece called “Hallowing the Man.”

I want you to hear these words in the context of our entire journey through Jesus’ (sometimes difficult) teaching from Matthew that we have been dwelling in throughout this fall:

All I can say for myself is that I find the stories about Jesus to be the most profound and captivating thing I have ever encountered. This is not to say I understand everything in the gospels or that there aren't things I find troubling or perplexing in them, even things about Jesus.

But there are moments--teachings and actions of Jesus--that defy my ability to describe how they affect me, in the vision they cast and inspire and provoke within me. **Having searched far and wide, I've encountered nothing like Jesus.** Nothing in the history of philosophy. Nothing in the other world religions, admirable and profound as they are. I experience Jesus as a singularity. Unprecedented. Unreplicated.

And so I hallow the man. I take off my shoes. I consider him to be holy, sacred ground. The location where heaven meets earth. Where the human and the divine intersect.¹

This is the King we celebrate on Christ the King Sunday.

The king is a shepherd. And the shepherd is a king.

And the shepherd king is the lover of our souls who invites us to love as he loves, to love *who* he loves, to love *because* he loves.

To love as a response to the love that holds and saves the world.

Thanks be to God.



¹ <http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.ca/2014/11/hallowing-man.html>