

## **Christ The King**

A sermon preached by Revd Jo Coney at St Peter's Wolvercote on 26 November 2017

*Refs: Ezekiel 34: 11-16,20-24; Ephesians 1:15-end; Matthew 25:31-end*

So here we are, the Sunday before Advent when our gaze changes direction. We look back at 'green' season and begin to look forward to Christmas. It's a time of anticipation, expectation and preparation. And on this 'Stir up' Sunday we hear again that great Collect set today as our Post-Communion prayer:

*Stir up O Lord, the wills of your faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may by you be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen*

This prayer reminds us that on this last Sunday before Advent, we are not only to conform to tradition and stir up our Christmas puddings, but more importantly, we are to stir up ourselves spiritually in readiness for the coming of Christ into this world at Christmas. So today we begin the time of waiting and preparation, practically and spiritually.

On the more practical level, as we prepare every Christmas gift, every Christmas card, may we stir up our resolve to give each gift and each card time and thought, and to do each one with care, with love and with prayer for the recipient. The other side is to prepare ourselves to receive the gifts, the care and the prayer from others. It may be more blessed to give than to receive but receiving can be much harder than giving. It involves making ourselves vulnerable, in debt to another, and thus the control is with the giver. We are, as recipients, dependent.

In Advent we wait to receive again God's gift of himself coming to us in human form. "Wait" is a hard word. God's time is not our time. We are waiting for God to do something, not us. We are expectant but wait passively. We must learn the ability to wait rather than succumbing to the seeming necessity of 21<sup>st</sup> century instant gratification. We strive to resist this cultural expectation and learn the patience of waiting, a sign of both maturity and faith.

Christmas is about receiving the greatest gift of all, the generosity of God giving us his son in human form, thus becoming vulnerable and putting ourselves into His hands and under His control. In this light it might seem strange that today's Gospel, the day when we also celebrate 'Christ the King', is about Christ's crucifixion and death rather than his birth and incarnation. However, Christ's death is about God's generosity to us, his people. For it is through Christ's death that the world is redeemed, offering each one of us forgiveness, salvation, and the offer of a personal intimate loving relationship with Him. It is through Christ's death that He comes fully into his Kingly Power.

But what does it mean to be a King mean? Described in our reading from Ezekiel, the Kingship of Israel was not just temporal but Divine. Kingship embodied for them the lord's blessing of harmony, prosperity and peace. The king was the embodiment of life-sustaining breath and the protecting shield for the people. King David is not only referred to as the King of Judah but as his descendant. Christ is called the first-born of God.

In our epistle we hear Paul's hymn of thanksgiving for the blessing of God's name and kingship. We hear how loyalty to God through Christ is to be expressed, as Paul says, by the profession of faith: faith that is not only evident in words and public worship but through 'the eyes of heart and soul'; faith that transforms us through our deepest knowledge and experience of God, allowing us to receive Him and His grace in openness and acknowledgment of His divine power, of his kingship over all things.

Paul continues by saying that our faith is also demonstrated by the quality of our relationships within the church – relationships of love and service to one another within single congregations, worldwide and throughout time. Our love for one another expresses, and grows out of, our Love for God.

For the church is not just an organisation to fulfil the institutional requirements of our Christian living and mission. It is not buildings, PCCs or ritual - not even the Bishop and the Diocese. The Church is people whose lives are dedicated to Christ their King and to one another. People who endeavour to live by the two great commandments, to Love God with all our being and to love our neighbour as ourselves. People whose faith is of the heart, not merely of convention or conformity.

All of which is spelled out very clearly in our Gospel not least in Christ's words when we hear him say: "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, and these will go into eternal punishment but the righteous will go into eternal life."

Matthew makes it very clear that the sheep and goats will be separated by the way they respond to the needs of those around them. But notice it is the King who decided which are which not us. We cannot, and are not to, judge who are sheep and who are goats even though we may sometimes be sorely tempted to do so!

Even on a purely animal level separating sheep from goats is far from easy. If you walk through the streets of Jerusalem, a shepherd herding his sheep and goats, mixed up together, through the streets is a frequent sight. I'm assured that the only way to tell which is which is that sheep's tails hang down while goats' tails turn up. Believe me this isn't easy. If we poor mortals can't separate sheep from goats, how much more are we unable to judge who is sheep and who is goat in God's eyes.

So as we approach Advent and hear again the call to 'stir up' our puddings and our wills, it's clear that the commandment to love one another is a practical and clear picture of how we are to live. But to do we must first obey the greatest commandment of all - to love God with all our being. So perhaps we need to be "stirred up"

- in thankfulness for the generosity of God, and for Christ's incarnation, for his death and resurrection;
- to receive His offer of forgiveness and salvation;
- to increased awareness of our dependence on God and to pray for increased generosity of mind and determination to do all we can to bring in the Kingdom of Christ our King, always remembering that what we do for the least of God's children we do for God himself;
- to ask ourselves in complete honesty - who is **my** King? Who or what is it that **most** determines the direction of our everyday lives - our motives, morals, priorities and decision making? Is it our culture? Is it our family and friends? Is it our Church? Or is it Christ Himself, Christ our King.

So let us pray again.

*Stir up O Lord, the wills of your faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may by you be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Amen.