**Cranmer Group Sermon, Worship & Prayers**

**November 22nd – Christ the King**

**‘The Sheep and the Goats - or not?’**

**(Matthew 25:31-46)**

*Dear Friends,*

*I hope that this finds you all doing as well as possible.*

*I’m very pleased to say that, following the Government’s recent announcement, we will be back in our church buildings for Sunday services as of December 6th. Even under restricted circumstances, I know that we have all missed being able to be together in person to worship God and enjoy fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ, so it will be great to be back together.*

*Details of our Christmas services will follow very shortly. We’re waiting for the Government and Church of England to give detailed guidelines as to what will, and what will not, be allowed, perhaps especially in relation to singing. But even if congregations are unable to join in carols as we all wish, the hope for which we wait in the coming Advent season - that of the Christ child, Emmanuel, God with us – remains as steadfast and sure as always.*

*My best wishes and prayers to you all, and God bless.*



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The Lord be with you **And also with you**

**The Collect for Christ the King   
(The Book of Common Prayer)**

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

**Christ Whose Glory Fills the Skies**

**Played by Sarah Hadfield**

Christ, whose glory fills the skies,  
Christ, the true, the only light,  
Sun of Righteousness, arise,  
Triumph o'er the shades of night;  
Dayspring from on high, be near;  
Daystar, in my heart appear.

Dark and cheerless is the morn  
Unaccompanied by thee;  
Joyless is the day's return  
Till thy mercy's beams I see;  
Till they inward light impart,  
Glad my eyes, and warm my heart.

Visit, then, this soul of mine;  
Pierce the gloom of sin and grief;  
Fill me, radiancy divine;  
Scatter all my unbelief;  
More and more thyself display,  
Shining to the perfect day.

**Bible Reading: Matthew 25:31-46 (New International Version)**

**Read by Jan Finlay**

***The sheep and the Goats***

*31 ‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.*

*34 ‘Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was ill and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”*

*37 ‘Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you ill or in prison and go to visit you?”*

*40 ‘The King will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”*

*41 ‘Then he will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was ill and in prison and you did not look after me.”*

*44 ‘They also will answer, “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or ill or in prison, and did not help you?”*

*45 ‘He will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.”*

*46 ‘Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.’*

**Sermon: ‘The Sheep and the Goats - or not?’ - Rev. Tim Chambers**  
As I’ve already said at the start of our service, today – the last Sunday before Advent; the final Sunday of the Church’s year, in fact - is both, traditionally, ‘Stir Up Sunday’, and also the feast of Christ the King.

The exhortation that the Lord might “stir up the wills of [His] faithful people” of course comes from our own Thomas Cranmer’s Book of Common Prayer, originally published in 1549. The institution of the Feast of Christ the King – perhaps surprisingly, given that so many of the feasts and festivals of the Church stretch back into antiquity – came well over four hundred years after then, in 1925.

Its creation by Pope Pius XI, and its rapid adoption into the Anglican calendar, came, of course, soon after what was then the most terrible conflict in human history. The feast of Christ the King appeared in a world where new nations and ideologies had dismantled and challenged traditional empires and monarchies, perhaps most clearly represented by the appearance of the Communist - and therefore atheist - Soviet Union. Within only a few years, Fascism and Nazism would have risen to threaten the security of the globe.

At the time of its institution, the feast of Christ the King spoke into a world full of doubt; negotiating deep trauma; and undergoing profound change.

In essence, when Christians first marked the feast of Christ the King in 1925, and when we keep its celebration today, we say that it is Christ’s sovereignty that has the last word. Though we may live in a world scarred by tragedy - felt all the more keenly in this coronavirus world of 2020 - and marred by the depredations and grubby compromises of human politics, the failures of this world are not the last word. Jesus Christ is.

Our Gospel reading for today, although it continues the theme of our readings between All Saints & Advent, about which I spoke last Sunday, of Jesus’s warnings to ready ourselves for the day when he will come to this earth for a second time our reading for today has at its heart this very point: the sovereignty of Jesus; sovereignty, in this case, in the form of divine, universal justice.

This passage from Matthew Chapter 25 is – again echoing what I said last week – one of the most challenging in the whole of Jesus’s teaching, and most hotly debated by theologians. I’m not sure that there exists a Bible translation that refers to it as anything other than ‘The Sheep and the Goats’ – that’s most definitely the element of it with which people most strongly identify – but that is only one aspect of this complex narrative, much of which defies simple explanation.

What’s not in doubt from Jesus’s words, though, is a clear statement that there will be a time and a place, in which everyone will be accountable for their actions in this life. And that there are two clear paths, one for those who have followed one path - “the sheep” - and one for those who have chosen to follow another - “the goats”.

It’s worth saying at this point that, much as I’m pretty sure all of us prefer meeting together in church in person on Sunday mornings, there are times when online services do have some advantages. At least there’s no way of telling whether you are sitting on my right, or on my left – so to speak - as I’m addressing you all this morning. In a normal church service, as the preacher of this passage gestures for emphasis, first to the pews on the right, and then to those on the left, there’s normally some pretty uncomfortable squirming as half of the congregation suddenly realizes that they’ve been implicitly equated with “goatiness”. And then the others, on the right, have their half-smiles, as they think that they’ve been identified with the sheep, punctured, as the vicar warns them not to slip into self-righteous smugness! In a virtual service, we’re all in neither camp – or perhaps both!

But what Jesus is telling his listeners here is of the utmost seriousness. It’s his very last teaching before the start of his Passion, ending on the cross of Calvary; the last impression he leaves with his followers before the quickfire events of the Last Supper, arrest, trial and crucifixion.

Jesus has referred to himself throughout his ministry both as the Son of Man, echoing the phrase used in the Old Testament, especially in the prophetic visions of the book of Daniel; and as the good shepherd, who guides, protects and cares for the sheep who follow him. But here, having initially described himself in these terms, Jesus calls this same figure the King. Christ the King, “sit[ting] on his glorious throne”. Christ the King who, in the very next chapter, will be anointed by a woman stranger, with the extravagant perfume that was the preserve of royalty – but which was also used in the preparation of the dead, for their burial.

Jesus is a King, but a King like no other; a king in whom sacrifice and authority are inextricably intertwined. A king who, in the hours following these words, will embody so many of the situations with which he confronts those before him, as he sits on this throne. He will literally become the one in need of clothes, as he is stripped by the guards; the one who is friendless, in the prisons of the Jewish and Romans authorities; the one in desperate need of a drink, as he hangs, dying, on the cross.

Indeed he identifies himself explicitly with those, the “least of these brothers and sisters of mine” as he describes them, who have received kindness and mercy from the men and women identified as ‘sheep’, and who have received none from those to whom Jesus refers as ‘goats’.

But, as Jesus replays to those who are before him on his throne, what they have done by showing love and compassion to those at the very bottom of the pile, is to extend that love and compassion as if it were to Jesus himself: “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” And, of course, the opposite.

And it’s clear from the King’s words that there are consequences from the actions of the two groups – that the ‘sheep’ will, since they extended loving arms to those in need, join him “in eternal life”; but those ‘goats’ who did not do so, will “go away to eternal punishment”.

There are whole sermon series to be preached on precisely what these “eternal life” and “eternal punishment” may mean, and there’s certainly no time to go into the depths of that this morning! But what does need addressing is the fact that, on the face of it, Jesus appears to be saying to his followers that, if they show compassion, kindness and love towards the poor and oppressed, then they will obtain an eternal reward – or the converse. It looks very much as though Jesus is saying in this story, that we achieve our salvation - or not – through our actions: salvation through works.

The sheep appear to attain their place in eternal life with the King as a direct result of helping those in need. And those whose eternal future is not so bright (even if rather warmer, in traditional depictions!), appear to receive that destiny, since they don’t show compassion to those same brothers and sisters.

But to believe that this is the case is both to fail to read this passage with the closeness it needs, and also to fail to see this passage in the context of Jesus’s teaching as a whole, and of the rest of the New Testament.

The key is that “the righteous”– as their surprise at what Jesus tells them they have been doing, shows - are absolutely unaware that they have been serving the needy in the way Jesus makes apparent to them in his words. They have not done so, in order that they might be noticed, or to curry favour with their Lord. They have done so since they’ve received the Gospel in their hearts; and the presence of the Holy Spirit within, has overflowed from them into the lives of others, as they seek to be true disciples of the King. Their actions are the external fruit of the spiritual transformation within.

And those who did not see the person of Jesus in the one who was “hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or needing clothes, or ill, or in prison”, did not do so precisely because they had not received Jesus into their lives. To paraphrase the words of our Collect just now, they had not had their “wills” “stirred up”, so they did not “plenteously [bring] forth the fruit of good works”, and so were not, “of thee … plenteously rewarded.”

We are called not simply to do good, but to follow Jesus Christ, and receive the salvation that alone can come through faith in him, and through his extraordinary grace extended towards each one of us, regardless of anything we may do. It is out of our faith in him, and love for him, whom himself is love, that we extend that love to those around us, and most especially those who are unloved, whatever form that lack in their lives may take. In Jesus’s words from the Sermon on the Mount, in the poetry of the King James Version, “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness, And all these things shall be added unto you.”

And it is wonderful to see, in these very difficult times, the Spirit of God moving in the hearts of our community, with, for instance, all of the donations that have been given to the foodhub that’s operating, through our churches, schools, and the commitment of individuals, to support those in need across our villages. Thank you all so much, who are involved in this and have donated to this.

But it’s also, as our world seems at the moment to be in more turmoil than we have known in many, many years, so important to remember that Jesus, crucified and resurrected, is not only in all, but over all. He is here, hungry and thirsty; a stranger; a prisoner in a cell. And He is here, King and saviour; Lord and Judge over all. King of the intimate; King of the infinite. Brother and friend; Christ the King.

May each of you know, as this church year draws to a close, his loving, personal presence alongside you, secure in the knowledge of his sovereignty over all.

In Jesus’ name I pray, Amen

**Intercessions**

**Led by Richard Bullock**

During our Intercessions I would be glad if, when I say, “Lord, in Your Mercy”, you could respond “Hear our Prayer”

Our loving Lord Jesus – we thank you that amid all the uncertainties and restrictions we are encountering in our daily lives we are able to meet together in this way to worship you; to thank you for your loving kindness.

We pray we may learn more of your impact on our lives by reading and dwelling on your own precious Word and that we shall glimpse some new facets of your love to each one of us and understand better what it truly means to be children of your kingdom and free.

We pray in particular that you will open our hearts and minds so that Tim’s words speak to us individually and open your Word to us in a special way so that we become utterly permeated with your love and righteousness.

LORD, IN YOUR MERCY,

**Hear our prayers.**

We pray for those who are now directly and indirectly suffering from Covid related illnesses and those who feel alone or lonely as the result of regulations imposed to protect the community from its spread. Help us to help each other, all those we know and love and, in particular, all members of our local communities in whatever way is most appropriate to our circumstances and their own.

Give re-assurance and knowledge of your loving presence to all those who face changes in their lives. We pray that if the fear of changes brings insecurity or uncertainty they may know the sure and certain knowledge of your comforting presence.

We pray particularly for the children of Orston Primary School and the Archbishop Cranmer Academy who find themselves in unusual and possibly incomprehensible environments, help us to show to them in the way we each live out your faith that they too may have the assurance that you are always with them. Keep them ever mindful of the lessons they have learned in their schools - that you came to give to each one of them life in all its fullness.

LORD IN YOUR MERCY,  
**Hear our prayers.**

Above all Lord we pray that each one of us may live so close to you and in your presence, that you will be a constant companion through every aspect of our lives as we seek to identify and follow your will for each of our lives. May we be always mindful that we should trust you with our whole hearts and not be reliant solely on our own understanding, because in so doing we shall not only be sure to follow the path you have chosen for each one of ourselves but also, sometimes without being aware of the fact, be helping and supporting others in our community to achieve your Will for them even if they do not acknowledge your presence in their lives.

LORD, IN YOUR MERCY,  
**Hear our prayers.**

We pray that you will give wisdom and strength to the leaders of our churches and communities that they may recognise their role in encouraging, leading and organising local and national needs and resources for the good and benefit of all members of the communities they serve. May their leadership and decisions show them to be infused with your love and a recognition that we are all neighbours one of another, needing and deserving each other’s love and support.

LORD, IN YOUR MERCY,  
**Hear our prayers.**

Finally, Lord, We ask all this in the precious name of Him who is our Redeemer, Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray to His Father, as Our Father….

**The Lord’s Prayer**As our Saviour taught us, so we pray:

**Our Father, which art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name;  
thy kingdom come;  
thy will be done,  
in earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive them that trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation;  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
the power, and the glory,  
for ever and ever.  
Amen.**

**The Collect for Christ the King   
(Common Worship)**

God the Father,  
help us to hear the call of Christ the King  
and to follow in his service  
whose kingdom has no end;  
for he reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, one glory.  
**Amen**

**Let All the World in Every Corner Sing  
Played by Deborah Davies**

Let all the world in every corner sing,  
My God and King!  
The heavens are not too high,   
His praise may thither fly,  
The earth is not too low,   
His praises there may grow,  
Let all the world in every corner sing,  
My God and king!

Let all the world in every corner sing,  
My God and king!  
The church with psalms must shout,  
No door can keep them out;  
But, above all, the heart  
Must bear the longest part.  
Let all the world in every corner sing,  
My God and king!

**A Closing Blessing**

Christ, our exalted King,   
pour upon you his abundant gifts   
and bring you to reign with him in glory;  
and the blessing of God almighty,  
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,  
be among you & remain with you always.  
**Amen.**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.  
**In the name of Christ, Amen.**