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**26th** **November** **2023** **Ezekiel** **34.11-16,** **20-24** **Matthew** **25.31-46**

**What** **sort** **of** **throne?**

*Gracious* *God* *–* *may* *your* *Living* *Word* *come* *to* *us* *afresh* *this* *morning* *–* *so* *touch,* *we* *pray* *our* *minds* *and* *hearts* *with* *your* *grace* *and* *truth* *–* *through* *Christ* *our* *Lord* *and* *in* *the* *power* *of* *your* *Spirit.* *Amen*

Today is Christ the King Sunday, technically marking the end of the Church Year – in which we’ve been looking at Matthew’s gospel. Next week it’s Advent Sunday which starts the year of Mark.

Around the time of the build up to the Second World War the Pope designated this last Sunday of the year as *Christ the King* because there was a point of contrast to be made. With dictators coming to power in both Germany, and closer to home, Italy, the Pope wanted the Church to appreciate a different kind of King – a servant leader.

The God who came to us in Jesus as the one not to be served but to serve and give his life.

Well, how does that fit with this final part of Matthew’s teaching before he takes his readers off to Jerusalem and the final days of Jesus culminating in the cross and empty tomb?

For a few chapters now Matthew has been grouping together stories about the coming Kingdom of God.

So begins our reading today: *When* *the* *Son* *of* *Man* *comes* *in* *his* *glory* *and* *all* *the* *angels* *with* *him,* *he* *will* *sit* *on* *his* *glorious* *throne.*

What follows is picture language and hyperbole. This is a story about a so-called *Day of Judgement.* And in this picture language it’s the sheep that are commended and welcomed with the goats being judged and condemned.

I’m not one of those people who take the bible literally at ever turn. But I’m conscious that often in days gone by, like the medieval church of yesterday, and perhaps even today in some more fundamentalist expressions of faith, there are those willing to use the idea of the fires of hell as an evangelistic tool. But I’m just not convinced that it’s ever right to scare people into belief.

So why did Matthew write like this?   
  
Well, it’s probably worth trying to appreciate he lived during desperately tough times. He writes his gospel around the time when the Romans had raised Jerusalem to the ground. The temple had been all but destroyed and it must have felt like the end of the world.

So, I think Matthew looks out on a world where the wrong sort of Kingship was so prevalent. Kingship that invaded, oppressed and subjugated a nation. There seemed, at that time in history, to be no natural justice. And maybe with that in mind authors like Matthew longed for God to intervene with a divine judgement and teach the enemy a thing or two.

Whatever his reasons, not least that general view that Christ’s return was just around the corner, Matthew writes, perhaps understandably, with a longing that God would bring to judgement those who had been so brutal in their treatment of others.  
  
And Matthew does this employing images of the end times and a last judgement that fit into a type of literature, well known in those days, called Apocalyptic. People loved apocalyptic literature in Matthew’s day. They knew it was basically a way of describing events, perhaps future events, with lots of mystical and mythical imagery. They knew it was all overblown. Today we might call it hyperbole, that is using exaggeration. But they loved it because it was interesting to read, made the reader sit up and be left with bold images that often disturbed and challenged. And much of the books of Daniel in the Jewish Scriptures and Revelation in the Christian Scriptures are written in this apocalyptic style.

Of course, even today we use exaggeration to make a point. So, if a parent finds the children in the back seat of car, whilst driving on holiday, too fractious they might say: if you don’t quieten down soon, I’ll stop the car and strap you to the roof till we get to Torquay. You know you’d never do that, but you appreciate the brief five minutes of quiet that followed after you said it!

So, on a Sunday when we might well ask, what sort of King is Jesus, I don’t think we should take these references to eternal punishment and eternal fire literally.

Instead, might we not read it understanding three things:  
1stly, these images come from a style of literature that was always meant to be taken poetically.  
2ndly, Matthew writes with this intense passion because he is desperate for God to intervene and bring justice to a situation in which so much injustice has been shown to an oppressed people by Emperor Ceaser and his armies.   
And 3rdly, this passage clearly shows us just how much Jesus longed for his followers not only to say the right words in worship but to live with the right deeds in everyday life.  
  
So, I have two questions I want to ask myself in the light of today’s reading from Matthew 25. What does this passage teach me about the Judgement of God and about the throne of Christ?  
  
Well, as to judgement, I suspect that sitting here in church this morning, judging our own lives, we might not be convinced that we are exclusively a sheep or a goat, but actually a combination of both.  
  
Indeed I’m told that in Cashmere it’s almost impossible to differentiate between sheep and goats, almost the only way is to note whether their ears are up or down!

I mean if I were to ask all of you who think you are goats to go and sit on the choir side of the sanctuary – and the choir are not to read too much into that, and all of you who think you are sheep to sit on the pulpit side – where would you sit?

Well, perhaps most of us wouldn’t know which side to go to and opt for the aisle instead. Sometimes we are like the goats, even if we’d love to be full time sheep!

So, when Jesus says feed the hungry, look after the homeless and clothe the naked – we’d love to say we hear that call to live out our faith with that sort of generosity of spirit. But we know that isn’t always the case.

We sit in the aisle. Perhaps the aisle is a place for us who are bad sheep or occasionally good goats. The aisle is the place for us when we wrestle with our conscience and know we could do better.   
  
The aisle isn’t a bad place to be because it understands we are all a work in progress.

When I contemplate the theme of judgement my mind isn’t drawn to ideas of eternal fires but of the responsibility I have before God to make judgements on my own life with the conscience God has given me. Am I doing everything I can to live in peace with my neighbour? Am I doing everything I can to live out the words I sing and pray in church? Am I treating others the way I would treat Christ?   
  
And that second question? What sort of King sits on heaven’s throne?  
  
Well, I believe it is a king who wears a crown of thorns, the servant king shown to us in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the servant king who is merciful, who stood by a group of men about to kill a so-called disgraced women and said, he who is without sin, let him cast the first stone.   
  
This is the servant king who is always mindful of justice, the Jesus who spoke up for the poor, who brought in the marginalised, who valued the contribution of the widow’s mite.   
  
And this is the servant king who again and again, seventy times seven, keeps on practicing forgiveness. The Jesus who wearing a crown of thorns cries from the cross to those who banged the nails into his hands, Father forgive.  
  
I can worship such a King today. And as I seek to worship, serve and honour this King of love, knowing that so often I’m like a bad sheep or a good goat, I need to remember this parable that reminds me that the way I treat others should be with the same honour and generosity of spirit with which I would seek to treat Christ. And that’s quite a judgement call to make every day of our lives.

Let me close with this story of a Roman soldier. We’ve spoken a lot today about some of the darker sides of the Roman empire, here’s a story of a citizen of that empire who showed a different side. His name was Martin. He was born in Hungary yet served the Roman garrison in Gaul, modern day France. One day he came upon a cold, distraught beggar and he used his sword to cut his own soldier’s cloak in two, giving half to the beggar. That night he dreamt of heaven and the one who sat upon its throne and he saw Jesus wearing half his cloak, saying to him, Martin, what you did today for the beggar who was cold and sick, you did for me. That dream changed his life and eventually he left the Roman army and became the Bishop of Tours.

Today if you attend any event at the church of St Martin in the Fields in London, you’ll see their logo is a square of roughly cut fabric, frayed at the edges like Martin’s cloak given away to someone in need. Today, that church, in its work alongside the vulnerable and homeless of central London continues Martin’s work of treating others as if they were treating Christ himself.

In all the judgements we make this week, may we seek to honour the Servant King. Amen  
  
*Ian Green, Amersham, 25th November 2023*