

Christ the king

We're used to, I think, in church, the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. The Good Shepherd who calls his sheep by name. The Good Shepherd who leads his sheep. And so on.

But have you ever wondered – if there's a good shepherd... well, can there be bad ones?

In this morning's reading from the book of Jeremiah we find bad shepherds: God is calling out the bad shepherds who have been leading the people of Judah astray. "you have scattered my flock," says the Lord, "and have driven them away, and you have not bestowed care on them... I will place shepherds over them who will tend them..."

This reading is dated to the time when Zedekiah was king of Judah. The name Zedekiah, in Hebrew, means "raised up," but despite him being raised up as king, he turned out to be a bad shepherd for his people. He wasn't the worst of the kings by any means – and he probably was quite pleasant to be around, but he was a weak leader – a weak leader, at a time when strong leadership was needed by the people.

Zedekiah, and the others that God, through Zedekiah, calls shepherds, are going to find there are consequences for their actions – and for their inactions, too. In verse 2 of the reading, we heard "the Lord, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: "Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done"

God is going to "punish" the shepherds for their evil doings - but while the bad shepherds are being punished, God will bring the sheep back into the fold where they will no longer be afraid, to where they should be – where they belong – and there they will be fruitful and multiply, and there they will be tended by good shepherds – who God will appoint.

Sheep were a major part of the agricultural economy of ancient Judea, and it was important that those who shepherded the flocks did it well and with great integrity. Despite how important shepherds were, they were not highly regarded. You didn't need an education to be a shepherd – a little on-the-job training would be enough. You didn't even need to read and write. You didn't need any specialised equipment, except maybe a crook – or a stick in a pinch – and maybe a sling.

But we find in the scriptures that the image of the king as a shepherd is a common one.

And, not only that: it is also a common image used for God. Remember the most famous psalm of them all? "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall want for nothing... he leads me to lie down in green pastures beside still waters".

Frequently in the Bible, people are compared to sheep. While that can be a nice image, it is not necessarily a compliment. Sheep are not the smartest animals in the world. Sheep require more care than cattle or pigs or goats. Unless their shepherd makes them move on, sheep will ruin a pasture, eating every blade of grass down to the roots until nothing is left but barren soil. Sheep are near-sighted, stubborn and easily frightened. They are easily injured too, and, of course, they can get lost easily.

We are all, so often, like sheep. And just like sheep, we need a shepherd. A good shepherd.

Having given notice to the bad shepherds, and assuring the people of hope, Jeremiah shares God's message of what will surely happen:

"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land."

Today is the final day of the church year, a time when we think particularly about that King, that King from David's line, who will reign wisely and do that is just and right. Next Sunday, the first Sunday in Advent, marks the beginning of a new church year. That seems a bit strange - we're not yet to the end of the calendar year ... Why would the church start a new year in November?

Well, Advent means "beginning or arrival or coming about," and speaks of new or renewed beginnings. It may be a little more than a month short of our new calendar year, but the church celebrates its advent, its beginning, by anticipating Jesus' arrival in history. So, on this last Sunday of the church year, a week before the new year begins, it is "Christ the King" day: When we recognise that God has raised up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right.

Over the last year, since Advent 2024, we have gone again through the cycle of Jesus' life and ministry and we now crown him King of kings and Lord of lords. We will do the same in the year to come, travelling through Advent, to remembering Jesus' birth at Christmas, his baptism in the Jordan River, his ministry and his journey to Jerusalem, his triumphal entry, his arrest, his trial, and his crucifixion. And his resurrection and ascension. Then the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the church at Pentecost.

We've been through the cycle before, many, many times. If we think of the calendar as a circle, then one of the furthest points from Christ the King Sunday is Palm Sunday, when we remember Jesus riding into Jerusalem, with the crowds crying, "Hosanna" and recognising him as the Messiah, the Christ. Messiah or Christ means anointed one, and in ancient times, kings were anointed. You might remember that Samuel anointed Saul the first king of Israel (1 Samuel 10), and then, later on, David (1 Samuel 16) – David who was originally a shepherd himself.

But on his 'triumphal entry' to Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, Jesus wasn't crowned with gold – he was crowned with thorns. As we heard in our reading from Luke's gospel, he wasn't raised up as king – he was raised up on the cross. He wasn't proclaimed king – but there was a mocking sign put on the cross over him: "this is the king of the jews."

Since Palm Sunday, the journey through the church year has continued, through resurrection, ascension, the pouring of the spirit, the stories of the apostles and the early church, and that has brought us full circle back to today.

Today, when we crown Jesus once more, and we raise him up as king – the shepherd king, the king who suffered for us, who laid down his life for us, who conquered death, and rose again to open the way for us all to everlasting life.

We celebrate today Christ the King Sunday, the reign of Christ. But we need to do that not just here in our church building, but in our world, and most of all in our hearts.

Let's celebrate Jesus as Christ the king.

King of kings, and Lord of lords.

Glory, Hallelujah.

Amen.