

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 22 NOVEMBER 2020

No 36

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1 Being ready for worship

Surprise! Surprise! Today is the last day of the (Church) year. Next Sunday begins Advent, and the cycle which begins with the coming of Jesus Christ begins all over again. The Lectionary rolls over (Year A gives way Year B). Today we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King, which was initiated by Pope Pius XI in 1925, but only located to the last Sunday of the liturgical year in 1970. Many Protestant Churches celebrate this festival, although more Evangelical denominations do not. Recognising that there is only one true King of this world is surely, however, a worthy thing to do. So enter today's time of devotion in the spirit of celebration. Jesus is Lord. Jesus is King.

2 Prayer of Adoration

The psalm set for today is Psalm 100. It is easy to see why: it accords beautifully with the reading from Ezekiel which is the subject of today's reflection. The hymn version of the psalm, known affectionately to many of us as "The Old One Hundredth", is one of the great hymns of the Church, and the full organ score, well delivered on a good pipe organ, surely has no equal.

The Old One Hundredth is thought to be the oldest hymn of praise in the English language, although ironically it was not composed in England (or any other English-speaking nation). Its author, William Kethe (d. 1594) was a Scottish minister in the Church of England when the advent of the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary brought many Protestants into grave danger. Kethe fled to Germany, and from Germany to Geneva in Switzerland, where he came under the influence of the leading Protestant John Calvin. In Geneva Kethe industriously participated in the translation of the Geneva Bible. One of Calvin's views was that worship should be based entirely on Scripture, and thus hymns should be restricted to the psalms, which had therefore to be translated into the vernacular. In this vein, Kethe also participated in translating all the metrical psalms into English, with the work being published as the Anglo Geneva Psalter in 1561. It was in the course of this latter project that our hymn was created by Kethe. Publication of the psalms in London occurred as the reign of the Protestant Queen Elizabeth I was beginning. It was thus rather fitting that the Old One Hundredth was sung at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, when the arrangement was done by Ralph Vaughan Williams. The tune is usually attributed to Calvin's musical director, Louis Bourgeois (c1510 – c1560). Unusually, The Old One Hundredth has never been set to any other tune, although the tune has been used for other hymns (including the well-known doxology "Praise God from whom all blessings flow"). What better hymn to use as a prayer of praise?¹

All people that on earth do dwell,
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice.
Him serve with mirth, His praise forth tell;
Come ye before him and rejoice.

Know that the Lord is God indeed;
Without our aid He did us make;
We are his folk, He doth us feed,
And for His sheep He doth us take.

¹ William J Petersen and Ardythe Petersen, *The Complete Book of Hymns. Inspiring stories about 600 hymns and praise songs* (Carol Stream, 2006), pp. 8f; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_100th accessed 5 November 2020.

O enter then His gates with praise,
Approach with joy His courts unto;
Praise, laud, and bless His name always,
For it is seemly so to do.

For why the Lord our God is good
His mercy is for ever sure;
His truth at all times firmly stood,
And shall from age to age endure.²
Amen

3 **Prayer of Confession**

It is important to confess our sins to God, because it helps us get our lives into a correct perspective. And if we sincerely confess our wrongdoing, we have Christ's promise that we shall be forgiven.

God our father,
We come before you in all our unworthiness and shame.
In the splendour of your presence, our darkness and evil ways are exposed,
and we have nowhere to hide.
Forgive us, Father, for what we are.
When we have failed to listen to your voice,
when we have ignored our sisters and brothers in need,
when we have acted selfishly and greedily,
when we have succumbed to dark desires,
when we have failed to act in love,
and when we have tried to repent, but failed –
forgive us we pray.
We cling to the cross of Christ and claim his promise of forgiveness.
And it is in his holy name that we pray.
Amen.

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

The writer of I John gives us this wonderful assurance:
If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves
and the truth is not in us.
If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just,
and will forgive our sins,
and purify us from all unrighteousness.
So we can be assured that our sins are forgiven.

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Ezekiel 34:11-24 (Lectionary omits vv 17-19)

The other Lectionary Readings

Psalm 100

Ephesians 1:15-23

Matthew 25:31-46

² Words from *The Church Hymnary* Revised edition (Oxford, 1927), hymn number 229.

6 Bible Reflection –

See below

7 Prayers for the world and Lord's Prayer

We are told much about the Kingdom of God. So many of Jesus' parables begin, "The Kingdom of God is like". The Kingdom is not, of course, a fantasy land, impossibly designed to fulfil everyone's desires. But it is to be a place very different from the world we live in. It is to be a place of peace. It is to be a place of justice for the poor and the marginal. It is to be a place in which the values of this world are turned on their head – the first will be last and the last will be first. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray the words, "Your Kingdom come." The prayer that follows seeks to flesh out that often glossed over petition.

God our Father, Jesus our good shepherd,
We pray today those important words, "Your Kingdom come."
We look at our world, and we see so much that is wrong.
In much of the Western world,
we have seen the biggest redistribution of wealth in human history.
But it has not been to the benefit of the poor, but at their expense.
We sanction a world in which a tiny portion of the population command untold wealth,
while others sink into poverty, and the truly poor are marginalised, demonised and pauperised.
The wealthy have seized control of our political processes,
and use their wealth to influence policies which benefit themselves
and preserve their privilege,
while they invest tiny amounts in philanthropy to give the appearance of genuine concern.
Between nations too, Father, there are huge disparities of wealth,
and wealthy nations like our own, wittingly or unwittingly, exploit unfair trading regimes,
which give a desperately needed trickle of income to their poorer trading partners,
while they themselves amass the benefits of the poorly paid labour of others.
God it is not supposed to be this way.
The world has plenty of resources to support a decent living for all,
if only we would learn to share, and to dispel our greed.
May your kingdom come.

Our world is full of conflict.
Very recently, we have seen Armenia and Azerbaijan fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh.
We watched the jubilation of the Azerbaijanis when victory was theirs,
but no one seemed to be counting the cost in lives, injuries, trauma and destruction.
We so often are driven by pride and bravado,
preferring to engage in a show of force rather than sit and listen
and negotiate and compromise.
There are too many areas of conflict, both actual and potential, across the world,
while we sit on stockpiles of nuclear weapons which could destroy all human civilisation.
The world is not supposed to be this way.
Were we only to use the vast resources invested in war and preparations for war
to address human needs, the very causes of warfare would cease to exist.
May your kingdom come.

Our world faces an existential threat from a climate that is changing dangerously,
and largely because of what we have done,
and from the over-exploitation of the world's resources.
At one time, we were ignorant of the disastrous effects of our addiction to fossil fuels,
but that has not been the case for many years now.

Yet we have dragged our feet; we have made excuses; we have prioritised our own comfort.
We have not held our politicians accountable,
and are sometimes even relieved that they keep finding excuses to sit on their hands.
Our demand for comfort and convenience, our consumer society,
our throwaway and wasteful culture and our fixation on economic growth
have created an economy which has tested the planet's systems beyond breaking point.
Species are dying out at unprecedented rates,
land is degrading into desert,
clean water is becoming scarcer,
and the planet is groaning from the pain we are inflicting on it.
Large tracts of land, even some whole nations, face inundation from rising sea levels.
Yet we are very reluctant to surrender any of our comfortable lifestyle.
Our greed drives our relentless exploitation of resources.
And we cast the blame on the politicians who fail to act,
rather than accept our own culpability and hold our leaders to account.
It is not supposed to be this way.
We can live comfortably and prosperously, without destroying the very earth that sustains us.
So we pray again, your Kingdom come.
Save us from ourselves. May we come to the good shepherd.
May we crown the King who will turn the world upside down,
and show us how life can be lived in peace, and with justice, and at peace with the earth.

We conclude our prayer with the prayer that Jesus taught us to say:
Our father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come;
Your will be done
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil,
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen

8 **Conclusion**

Today should be a day of celebration. Jesus is king; the world can never be the same again. Go with a light and joyful heart, for the Lord is your shepherd, the good shepherd, and you belong to him.
Amen.

BIBLE REFLECTION
THE GOOD SHEPHERD: CHRIST THE KING

Most of us grew up with Psalm 23. Set to the usual tune *Crimond*, it remains something of a favourite, though it is perhaps most often heard these days as funerals. So the opening words, “The LORD is my shepherd” sound quite natural to us, even though few of us have more than the vaguest notion what the role of a shepherd in biblical times actually was. Despite the importance of the wool and lamb industries in Australia, our flocks are not tended by shepherds. It’s true that, in episcopal churches, bishops carry a crosier, often called a “crook”, which draws its inspiration from the shepherd’s crook of old. However the symbolism of this staff of office, which relates to the bishop’s pastoral and disciplinary role, is largely lost in the 21st century. In fact the only times most of us come across the word “shepherd” are probably in biblical references that we don’t fully understand, and when it crops up as someone’s surname!

The role of the shepherd is central to today’s reading from Ezekiel, which is one of a great many biblical passages which draw on the symbolism of this pastoral vocation. It would be good, then, to establish just what a shepherd did in biblical times, when he was responsible, not for a huge Australian mob of sheep, but for a comparatively small flock. (Remember Jesus’ parable of the lost sheep (Matthew 18:10-14), in which the shepherd was responsible for one hundred sheep.) The commentator Joseph Blenkinsopp provides this excellent description of a biblical shepherd’s duties and responsibilities.

The shepherd's job no doubt had periods of boredom and relative inactivity, but it could also be dangerous. There were thieves to contend with (Gen. 31:39) and beasts of prey, including the lion (I Sam. 17:34-35; Isa. 31:4; Micah 5:8) – generally with the help of nothing more than a stick or similar primitive weapon and maybe a dog (Job 30:1). The shepherd had to give an exact reckoning for the animals confided to him (Lev. 27:32; Jer. 33:13; Ezek. 20:37) and either pay for any that were missing or produce a part of the carcass if one had been killed (Exod. 22:13; Amos 3:12).³

This makes it clear that the shepherd’s role was a very responsible one, with the welfare and protection of his flock at its heart, even at risk to his own safety. Understanding this may lead us to read familiar biblical passages a little differently. For example, in I Samuel, when Jesse presents his seven eldest sons to Samuel, but excuses the absence of David because “he is keeping sheep” (I Samuel 15:11), it is easy to imagine a callow youth left at home because of his tender immaturity. Such was hardly the case! Bearing Blenkinsopp’s explanation in mind, you may find it fruitful to reread Psalm 23. It takes on very powerful symbolism when we really understand what it meant to have the protection of a shepherd.

This protective and pastoral role of the shepherd was commonly used as a metaphor for the responsibilities of a king in the ancient Near East – and by extension it was sometimes applied to gods⁴. We may carry a stereotypical notion that all ancient kings in the biblical world were unfettered, ruthless tyrants. While it’s true that kingly power may not have been particularly constrained, we might refer, for example, to the famous law code of Hammurabi (King of Babylon, 18th century BC), in which he declared that he had been appointed by the gods “to promote the welfare of the people, cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and evil that the strong might not oppress the weak.”⁵ The analogy with a shepherd is an obvious one.

With those cultural understandings in place, we can now approach our reading from Ezekiel.

³ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel: Interpretation: A Bible commentary for teaching and preaching* (Louisville, 2012), p. 155.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

Ezekiel himself was a prophet of Judah, who lived through the fall of the southern kingdom in 586 BC, and went into exile with many of his compatriots. His prophecies looked ahead to a time when God would end the exile and regather his people in the land of promise.

However the focus of the overall passage – and the ten verses which precede it – is on good and bad shepherds. In verses 1-10, Ezekiel castigates the “shepherds” of Israel for being self-serving and ignoring the needs of the people.

You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. (34:4)

By “shepherds” Ezekiel clearly means the kings of Judah, whom he blames for the exile (v. 5). While the monarchy had ceased to exist with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, Ezekiel is looking back to the last days of the kingdom, and sees the self-obsession of the kings, and their neglect of the ordinary people’s needs, as the reason for Judah’s fall. It’s worth commenting in passing that this explanation differs markedly from that of Jeremiah, for whom the sin of the whole nation (as opposed to just its leaders) was the reason for their defeat, and the exile for Jeremiah was a punishment visited upon all the Jews.

If the past has been despoiled by the wantonness of bad shepherds, and the people of Judah are now paying the price of that neglect by their leaders, Ezekiel moves onto a new hope. Into this situation, God himself will intervene as a good shepherd to rescue his people.

As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land.

God will reverse the neglect his people have suffered at the hands of their former human shepherds – “I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak”. God himself will tend to the needs of his people, while at the same time he will mete out punishment on the past shepherds who had so neglected their people – “I will feed them with justice”.

This passage has been chosen by the writers of the Lectionary for the Feast Day of Christ the King because of what is promised next. Our selection closes with a messianic prophecy.

I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them....

By this period, the legendary King David had come to symbolise the ideal monarch. Whether Ezekiel meant that David himself would be reincarnated as the new and perfect king, or that the *House* of David would be restored, or indeed that an individual, perhaps a descendent of David, would fulfil this role is not clear. However in keeping with the symbolism of the shepherd, a new and perfect shepherd/king is promised, the figure that had come by Jesus’ time to be known as the “messiah”. And it was to this messianic role that Jesus – a descendent of David (II Timothy 2:8) – himself laid claim.

As previously I suggested a rereading of Psalm 23, understanding exactly how responsible, demanding and dangerous the role of a shepherd was; now I suggest that we revisit some familiar

New Testament passages, in which the symbolism of the shepherd we've found in Ezekiel is found.

Jesus' parable of the good shepherd is found in both Matthew (18:12-14) and Luke (15:3-7). This is Matthew's version.

Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

Here we have a description of a good shepherd, who takes his responsibilities seriously, cares for each and every sheep, and faces hardship and danger to rescue the one sheep (the "little one", the vulnerable one) who has gone astray. This is the care that the leaders of Judah in Ezekiel's day had failed to show; they cared only for themselves and their own comfort, at the expense of the "sheep" they were supposed to be shepherding. The vulnerable were simply left to perish. Jesus told this story to illustrate the love which God has for all people, disproportionately so for the vulnerable. The disciples are being sternly warned not to fall into the neglectful habits of Judah's shepherds of Ezekiel's day (and their own day), but to have especial concern for the vulnerable. We have entered into the era of the new kingdom of the good shepherd which Ezekiel had foretold.

Who is the good shepherd, however? In John's gospel, Jesus very clearly and explicitly lays claim to that role. "I am the good shepherd," he says (10:11). But this good shepherd goes far further than seeking out the lost, and caring for the vulnerable – although Jesus most certainly did those things. In Ezekiel's prophecy God had promised, "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured," and Jesus fulfilled all of that role. Jesus' claim to be the good shepherd is very clearly a claim to be the fulfilment of Ezekiel's prophecy – Ezekiel's *messianic* prophecy.

Jesus the good shepherd, though, was preparing to sacrifice even more than this.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.

This good shepherd not only risked his life for the sheep; he gave it willingly for them. This good shepherd gave his all for the sake of the sheep.

What sort of king do we have here? What kind of king do we celebrate on this Feast Day of Christ the King? The very word "king", and the notion of royalty, conjure up for us all kinds of images for us. Perhaps we think of Queen Elizabeth II, who, while a constitutional monarch without real power, nevertheless lives a wealthy and privileged life in absolute splendour. Perhaps we think of some of her forebears who enjoyed far greater power and no less splendour. Perhaps we think of the great potentates of the ancient world – the pharaohs of Egypt, god-kings; or the emperors of Rome. Wherever we turn in human concepts of monarchy, we find wealth, privilege and usually great power. Some holders of kingship certainly have lived up to Hammurabi's ideal that the monarch should "promote the welfare of the people, cause justice to prevail in the land, ... destroy the wicked and evil that the strong might not oppress the weak." Even they have done so, however, from a position of privilege and power, and rarely have they sacrificed any of that to fulfil their higher calling.

The King we celebrate today is not like that. This king came, not in splendour, but humbly. This

king came not to be served, but to serve. This king came not to judge but to save. This king does not look like, or act like, any king which history might bequeath us. This king came willingly to lay down his life for his “sheep”.

Could Ezekiel have imagined that such might be the good shepherd God promised through his prophecy? Surely not. Nor is this the kind of messiah so eagerly anticipated by the Jews of Jesus’ day. No one was expecting the good shepherd to look like Jesus.

Yet a more glorious king there could not be. This good shepherd, who lays down his life for the sake of others, asks nothing more of his sheep than that they trust him. We are used to kings who demand things of us, who place conditions on their benevolence, who enter into a bargain with us. They come to be served. Jesus the King came only to give. The focus is not on what we must do – for we can do nothing; the focus for this king’s reign is what Jesus has already done for us. The gospel of Jesus Christ is that this king willingly laid down his life for the sheep who had gone astray.

The Feast Day of Christ the King is a celebration of the good news of the Gospel. Hallelujah! Heil King Jesus!