

Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, 22 November 2020

Welcome to the joint worship for Christ Church and The Bridgwater Drive Church. Today is the feast of Christ the King, the Sunday before Advent.

Call to Worship (based on Psalm 100)

Shout with joy to God, all the earth!
Remember that our God is the only God —
the One who made us,
the One who sustains us,
the One whose Spirit lives within us.
Let us enter God's house with thanksgiving;
and come into God's presence with praise.
For God is good,
with unfailing love that lasts forever,
and faithfulness that extends to all generations.

A prayer based on Psalm 100, from the URC Prayer Handbook

Great and wonderful God, how good to enter your gates and to gather in your name/
How good to know that you are the eternal God and we are your beloved people.
How good to sing in praise of you, to pray and stand in awe of your greatness.
We give you thanks, Gracious God: how good it is to be here.

Hymn Make Way, make way (R&S 141)

Make way, make way
For Christ the King
In splendour arrives
Fling wide the gates and welcome Him
Into your lives

And those who mourn with heavy hearts
Who weep and sigh
With laughter, joy and royal crown
He'll beautify

He comes the broken hearts to heal
The prisoners to free
The deaf shall hear, the lame shall dance
The blind shall see

We call you now to worship Him
As Lord of all
To have no gods before Him
Their thrones must fall!

*Refrain: Make way! Make way!
For the King of kings, For the King of kings
Make way! Make way!
And let His kingdom in*

Recording from the Soundcloud of Revd Phil Nevard, used with permission. <https://soundcloud.com/revnev>

Prayer of confession (based on Ezekiel 34 & Matthew 25:31-46) **URC Prayer Handbook**

Why is injustice so beguiling?
Of course when we name it – point it out –
no one wants to believe they are on the side of the unjust.
Yet how easily we drift along, benefitting from the unjust systems
which uphold the ways of the world.

We wish there was no 'rich and poor', but are grateful to live comfortably in our comfort.
We wish nations did not oppress their neighbours, but ate thankful to live in a nation counted among
the powerful.
We abhor racism and prejudice, but are slow to recognise these traits in ourselves.
We do not always think things through, but accept our place in the way things are.

They say that sheep tend to follow, without a thought to where they are being led.
Were you right, then, to compare us to sheep?
And yet you, yourself, promise to be our Shepherd, tending your beloved flock.
So cut through the beguiling tones of injustice and let us hear and follow you. **Amen**

Bible reading: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

This is a reading I don't remember having heard before. "I myself [that is God] will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep." And later "I will judge between sheep and sheep." Now what's that all about? Because later, in the passage from Matthew's Gospel we get the much better known, judging by the Son of Man of sheep and goats; the sheep being those who did the will of God in taking care of the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, the prisoner, and the goats being those who didn't.

Now, I like a good sheep story as much as the next person, and as we know the Bible is full of shepherd and sheep imagery, not least of Jesus himself as the Good Shepherd, but what is with the fat and thin sheep and the judgement between sheep?

We need to go back to the start of Chapter 34, to get an inkling what this is all about. It starts with the exhortation of God to the prophet Ezekiel to prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, who have been feeding themselves instead of feeding the sheep. The shepherds here represent Israel's kings, who were contracted by God to care for God's people, the sheep, but they have not. In modern times this would be more like politicians. They have abused the people and scattered them. God is the good shepherd who will gather together the dispersed flock and take care of them, but in verse 16 the focus shifts from care to judgement – God will judge some of the sheep as well as their shepherds. God will destroy the fat, strong sheep. It's an easy metaphor to understand – that God will punish the wealthy people who have taken advantage of the poor and vulnerable. The 'bad' sheep must be separated from the good and then God will install his servant David, and he will feed all the sheep and be their shepherd. And there we see the link from Matthew backwards – Jesus is of the line of David, a fact Matthew takes great pains to tell us in his nativity story. An angel appears to Joseph, "son of David" and before that Matthew is the only Gospel writer to give the genealogy of Jesus, "the son of David".

Matthew's gospel is the one that draws most extensively on the Hebrew Scriptures that his audience would have known well. It forms a sort of bridge between the two Testaments showing how prophetic statements from the Old Testament are fulfilled in Jesus. Matthew's readers were impressed by history – if they could see Jesus linked to the old stories and the old prophecies, they would believe he was the Messiah.

So why does Jesus judge between sheep and goats and not sheep and sheep? I haven't found the answer to that question, but in the search I found that the distinction may come from the different fabrics produced. Goat hair was used to make rough sackcloth with all the accompanying significance of mourning and sadness; while white wool was a fine cloth associated with prosperity.

Hymn Heaven shall not wait
Heaven shall not wait
for the poor to lose their patience,
the scorned to smile, the despised to find a
friend:
Jesus is Lord;
he has championed the unwanted;
in him injustice confronts its timely end.

Heaven shall not wait
for the rich to share their fortunes,
the proud to fall, the elite to tend the least:
Jesus is Lord;
he has shown the master's privilege –
to kneel and wash servants' feet before they
feast.

Heaven shall not wait
for the dawn of great ideas,
thoughts of compassion divorced from cries of
pain:
Jesus is Lord;
he has married word and action;
his cross and company make his purpose
plain.

Heaven shall not wait
for triumphant Hallelujahs,
when earth has passed and we reach another
shore:
Jesus is Lord
in our present imperfection;
his power and love are for now; and then for
evermore.

Words and Music by John L Bell and Graham Maule – recorded by members of Victoria Methodist Church's choir and orchestra during Lockdown 2020, used with permission

Bible readings: Matthew 25:31-46

Today we celebrate Christ the King. Jesus is a very different king. He is not like the shepherd kings of Israel who mistreated the sheep; he is the Good Shepherd, God's appointed, who gathers the flock and takes care of them. He is a servant king who will enter Jerusalem, not triumphantly, but meekly on a donkey, the one who will wash the feet of his disciples. And soon we will hear of his lowly birth – not in a palace like a human king, but in a stable with the animals.

I saw this picture a week or two ago on Facebook, and I have to confess it made me laugh. For those of you who can't see it well, the 'spoiler alert' is that above the painting of the nativity, there is a crucifix on the stable wall.

But in reality, there is no spoiler. We already know the outcome. We are post-resurrection people, we can never unknow what we know, we can't put the genie back in the bottle. For all the lovely nativity stories and children's nativity plays; the retelling of Jesus' birth story every year with the attendant shepherds, sheep, angels and wise men, we know the end of the story. We know how this film turns out, and it's not a happy ending. This sweet, innocent baby, snoozing in the straw, nuzzled by the animals, ends up on a cross. Sorry to be a killjoy – don't worry normal service will be resumed next week with the Advent candles! But today we celebrate Christ the King, so we need to remember what kind of king Jesus is. The kind that lays down his life for us.



This section of Matthew 25 about the Son of Man coming in judgement, separating sheep from goats, comes after two parables telling the faithful what they need to do. Firstly, the bridesmaids with their lamps – five have oil ready and five don't and so they miss the arrival of the bridegroom while they go and buy some. You have to be ready, because you do not know when the Lord will come. The next, the parable of the talents, which we had last week, tells the faithful to stand up against unjust landowners and speak out about injustice. Now, they are told, in a somewhat indirect way, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, take care of the sick and visit prisoners.

Moralizing interpretations of the sheep and the goats overlook the element of surprise. We might expect the goats to express surprise: Lord, when, they ask, did we see you and fail to care for you? But the sheep are no less surprised: Lord, when did we see you and perform these services? Goats do not see themselves as goats — but neither do sheep recognize themselves as sheep.

There is a deeper logic that accounts for this element of surprise. For Matthew, ethical behaviour responds to Jesus' commands. But it does not result from effort, from trying hard. Instead, Matthew points out, repeatedly, that good fruit comes from good trees. Good trees, Jesus explains, cannot bear bad fruit, nor can bad trees bear good fruit. Jesus and John the Baptist, warn that the bad trees will be cast into the fire. Trees are known by their fruit.

Matthew's emphasis on obedience can be forbidding, but Matthew's Jesus does not instruct disciples that they should become the salt of the earth or the light of the world; he tells them they are such. Likewise, Jesus does not command his followers to hunger and thirst for justice, pursue peace, and so forth; he blesses those who do already do those things. Judgment simply brings out a reality that has been present all along. And sheep and goats? Well they just make for cute visual aids!

Hymn When I needed a Neighbour

When I needed a neighbour,
Were you there, were you there?
When I needed a neighbour, were you there?
And the creed and the colour
And the name won't matter,
Were you there?

I was hungry and thirsty,
Were you there, were you there?
I was hungry and thirsty, were you there?
And the creed and the colour
And the name won't matter,
Were you there?

I was cold, I was naked,
Were you there, were you there?
I was cold, I was naked, were you there?
And the creed and the colour
And the name won't matter,
Were you there?

When I needed a shelter
Were you there, were you there?
When I needed a shelter were you there?
And the creed and the colour
And the name won't matter,
Were you there?

When I needed a healer,
Were you there, were you there?
When I needed a healer, were you there?
And the creed and the colour
And the name won't matter,
Were you there?

Wherever you travel,
I'll be there, I'll be there.
Wherever you travel, I'll be there.
And the creed and the colour
And the name won't matter,
I'll be there.

Sydney Carter arr. Thomas Hewitt Jones (permission given)
Sloane Square Chamber Choir Directed by Oliver Lallemand
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Youtube video here, if you want to watch it: <https://youtu.be/pXiHcpsMJxs>

Prayers of intercession

Let us pray to our Lord Jesus Christ for all those who need our compassion and care:

For all who have lost their way in life we cry out to you to make the Church welcome them and show them the Good News of your love.

With all people driven from their homes, with the many victims of war and civil strife, with all strangers living in foreign lands, we cry out that people may be hospitable to them.

With all those who hunger for food, who thirst for justice, who crave for human dignity, we cry out that we may hear your voice in them.

With all those who care for the sick and the disabled, with doctors, nurses, pharmacists, midwives, we cry out that we may recognize you in those who need affectionate, loving care.

With all those who are imprisoned because of their convictions, with all those who are persecuted; who are prisoners of their hatred, their greed or their failings, we ask you to free them.

The voices that cry out to us, the eyes that plead with us, may we recognize you in them, Lord, and love you in them. Help us to be there for all those who are hungry and thirsty, not only for food, but for your love and grace, for those who are cold and need shelter, for those who need healing, we ask in the name of Jesus, the servant King who taught us how to serve and to love all, even our enemies. **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer

Offertory

A reminder to please send in your gifts for the work of the church and for the Christmas appeal, by cheque or bank transfer. This is the last week for the Christ Church Christmas appeal. We are closing it on 29 November, so that Hopeworx has time to purchase items for their Christmas Hampers before distribution in early December.

Hymn Christ be Our Light (recorded by the CC Music group before lockdown)

Please sing along at home!

Words on next page

Longing for light, we wait in darkness
Longing for truth, we turn to You.
Make us Your own, Your holy people
Light for the world to see.

Christ, be our light!
Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in Your church gathered today.

Longing for peace, our world is troubled
Longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has pow'r to save us.
Make us your living voice.

Christ, be our light!
Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in Your church gathered today.

Longing for food, many are hungry
Longing for water, many still thirst.
Make us Your bread, broken for others
Shared until all are fed.

Christ, be our light!
Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in Your church gathered today.

Many the gifts, many the people,
Many the heart that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another
Making your kingdom come.

Christ, be our light!
Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in Your church gathered today.

Blessing

Go now, and embrace the hope to which God has called us.
Recognise Christ in friend and stranger,
and as Christ has been gracious to you,
so be gracious to those in need.

And may God give you a place of rest on rich pasture;
may Christ Jesus be the shepherd king who binds your wounds;
and may the Holy Spirit give you wisdom
and reveal to you the fullness of the one who fills all in all.

And the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be
with us all, evermore. Amen