

May the words that I speak and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable to you Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Readings:

O.T. Ezekiel 34 v11-16, 20-24

Epistle, Ephesians 1 15-23

Gospel, Matthew 25 31-46

**Sheep**, shepherds and shepherdesses.....

I think I may have mentioned this before, but I never realised, when we moved to Scotland just over 2 years ago, that sheep would play such a big part in my life.

Now, I even have a lovely new friend who is a retired shepherdess. And from my window I can see sheep in the field beside our bungalow.

You may have noticed that sheep and shepherds are the key elements in both our Old Testament reading from the prophet Ezekiel and the Gospel passage from Matthew.

Why sheep?

Well, in Israel at the time of Jesus and, much earlier, in the time of Ezekiel sheep were a major part of the economy. The shepherds were the *Mr every man* of their day -- perhaps they could even be compared to *White-van-man* now.

In the story that Ezekiel tells - and particularly the verses which we didn't hear because they were not included in the lectionary (I'm not quite sure why) the sheep represent the nation and people of Israel. The shepherds represent the political and the religious leaders of the day.

The critical message which Ezekiel delivered to these people could be applied equally to us today:

\*Despite having rich and abundant food supplies, they were not prepared to share them with the less fortunate in their society.

\*They were absorbed with following the latest trends and fashions.

\*They ignored the weak and offered no support to those unable to support themselves.

\*They did not provide healing for the sick or bind up the wounded.

It is interesting to compare this to a story with which we are all very familiar; the parable of the good Samaritan. He stopped to help a Jewish traveller -- provided transport to the nearest Inn on his donkey, while he walked -- having first bound up the man's wounds. He then paid for the stranger to be given shelter and food while he continued on his journey and promised to pay any extra expenses on his return trip.

This was in stark contrast to the behaviour of passing Jewish religious and political leaders who had just left the man to die of his wounds by the roadside.

This New Testament story, told by Jesus, clearly matches the story he must have read in Ezekiel -- describing how God's flock, the Jewish people, had been abandoned by those in a position to help them.

The Old Testament shepherds of Israel had not tried to rescue the poverty-stricken 'sheep' who had lost their way, lost their faith and lost all hope because of state oppression which finally drove them out into exile.

God makes a promise to the people that he himself will rescue them and bring them back to safe pasture in the Promised Land. But this could equally apply to being in God's Kingdom -- a spiritual place of safety.

Here we pick up again on the image of the Good Shepherd Jesus, who has come to do exactly what Ezekiel promised 500 years earlier.

God, in the form of Jesus, has come to rescue his flock. But the message is fundamentally different this time of telling. It is not just the original flock (the Jews) who will be saved but -- as John describes it in his gospel -- "Others will come to join them and there will be one flock and one shepherd".

But how is the flock to continue to survive and grow once the good shepherd has returned to the father?

This is where the parable of the sheep and the goats carries the message further. It assumes that the Kingdom of God has arrived because Jesus has come into the world to bring it about.

The account in the Gospel is a direct re-telling of the Ezekiel story -- one that Jesus' audience would be very familiar with -- but with an unexpected twist.

It is the last parable in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus is in Jerusalem and will be put to death on the cross as a traitor within a few days. Jesus is trying to prepare his followers for what is about to happen.

He talks to them about his Kingdom (of which they are now part) as if they are his flock.

But this flock has sheep and goats mixed up together! Although massively significant in religious terms, this did not require a quantum leap of imagination for middle-eastern livestock herders.

The sheep his audience knew were not what we are used to seeing today. In those days it was hard to distinguish between sheep and goats. They were all rather scraggy and could be imagined as members of the same motley flock.

There is a lovely painting of this by Sieger Koder called, "the meal with sinners" which I know is familiar to some of you. With the artist's help we enter the house of the Lord , the Kingdom of God.

It shows a very random group of men and women sitting round a table.

A woman is wearing a mourning veil over her eyes; perhaps she represents the suffering and anguish of our world.

Another guest -- a young man -- shows the marks of violence on his person. His hand (what's left of it) is covered in a blood-stained bandage -- someone who had experience of violence, sickness or exile.

At the opposite end of the table, a clown (perhaps reflecting the foolishness of a God who turns society's values upside down). Clowns also mask suffering and pain under a cloak of comic antics and wit.

Through an open door can be seen the barren hills of Judea. The guests are being offered bread broken from a common loaf, and only the hands of the giver can be seen.

His palms are open -- showing the mark of the nails.

We might be any one of those guests sitting together at the meal so that they might become part of his flock and share in his Kingdom.

If we go back to the story...

Along with sharing this meal, we are reminded that as citizens of the Kingdom we have the responsibility of following Jesus's commandment to "love one another as he has loved us."

In Israel, unlike here in the UK, the sheep *follow* the shepherd. They trust him to lead them safely and he trusts THEM to follow him. Jesus' ministry was about to be cut short; he was going to have to leave his followers and leave his ministry for THEM to continue. THEY would have to take the message to others and live their lives following his example.

And what an example! Jesus cared for everybody. He reached out and touched the lepers; he allowed a haemorrhaging woman to come close and touch the hem of his garment -- making him ritually unclean but offering her healing. He encouraged a young boy to share his packed lunch to help feed a multitude, to perform a miracle of SHARING so that all were fed.

So, when Jesus teaches his flock, he reminds them of the things in their everyday lives that will witness to others that they are his followers -- even if he is not still physically with them.

THEY are to become the good shepherds.

One way to read this story is to see it as Jesus telling his followers that they should show their faith by reaching out to all those around them -- *particularly* those on the margins of society. It should be an ACTIVE FAITH – a witness that God's Kingdom has come on earth in the incarnation of Christ.

And who are these people on the margins of society?

If we look at Jesus himself, they are the ones he comes close to, helps, heals and forgives. Not their religious leaders. He talks about feeding the hungry, welcoming others into our homes, offering them

hospitality and clothing them. Looking after them when they are sick and visiting them when they are in prison.

I wonder how many of you have visited a prison. Near where we lived in London there were two prisons – a category ‘A’ remand prison for men and a general prison for women.

We had a wonderful neighbour at the time who was a Samaritan. She went into the high security men’s prison and trained some of the prisoners to become Listeners for their fellow inmates. It was thanks to her that I spent my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday there, enjoying lunch prepared and served by some of the prisoners. They had created within in the prison a beautiful restaurant where the prisoners were given the opportunity to train as chefs and waiters so that they had the chance to find a new career when they were released. They had even made me a birthday cake.

This neighbour was not a Christian, but her life is the best example I have ever found of someone who went out of her way to help everyone. When she wasn’t at the prison she was volunteering at the local hospital, or coming alongside her neighbours when they were in trouble -- including me. Her life exemplified all that this story is trying to say.

Jesus is no longer physically here on Earth but we, as his followers, are challenged to reach out to those in need. As St Teresa of Avilla said: “Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours”.

In a moment we are going to listen to the music of a hymn composed by Graham Kendrick, the lyrics of which reinforce this same message.

These words also remind us of the FINAL EXAMPLE which Jesus gave his disciples, according to John’s Gospel.

At their last meal together, he fills a bowl with water and kneels down and washes their dusty feet. HE becomes *their* SERVANT  
The King we worship and serve is a special sort of King, as is his Kingdom.

The last verse of the hymn says:

“So let us learn how to serve  
And in our hearts enthrone Him  
Each other’s needs to prefer  
For it is Christ that we are serving”

“This is our God, the SERVANT King  
He calls us now to follow him  
To give our lives as a daily offering -  
Of worship, to the servant King”

**Amen**

David will now play to us on the organ as we reflect on those words....