Reign of Christ the King

Reign of Christ the King – 26 November 2017

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Dan Carmichael, Minister of Lenzie Union, for his thoughts on the last Sunday of the Christian Year.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

Introduction

The Revised Common Lectionary gives the title ‘Reign of Christ the King’ to the last Sunday of the Christian Year.

The Feast of Christ the King originated in the Roman Catholic Church. It was authorised by Pope Pius XI in 1925, against a backdrop of increasing secularisation and the rise of authoritarian regimes in Europe. The aim was to celebrate the all-embracing authority of Christ, which leads people to seek the ‘peace of Christ’ in the ‘Kingdom of Christ’ (1).

To begin with, the Reign of Christ the King was observed on the last Sunday of October, but was moved to the final Sunday of the Christian Year in 1970. It was included in the ecumenical Revised Common Lectionary when it was published in 1992.

(1) Information in ‘The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, 1983, p278

Ezekiel 34:11-16; 20-24

The backdrop to the book of Ezekiel is the siege and destruction of Jerusalem, followed by the ensuing exile of its monarch and people in Babylon. Chapter 34 as a whole describes the contrast between the current rule of the ‘shepherds of Israel’ and the coming rule of God (translated as ‘Lord God’ in RSV, ‘Sovereign Lord’ in NIV, ‘God the Master’ in The Message).

Despite the negligent governance of Israel’s ruling elite – the ‘shepherds of Israel’ (verses 4-6) – the message of these verses is one of hope and justice rooted in God’s personal and persistent rule as the shepherd who cares for the people (verses 11-16). Mention is made of David in verses 23 and 24. This both looks back to the true and Godly king of the past and looks forward to the just rule of David’s descendant in the future.

The personal nature of God’s rule is emphasised by the frequent use of the personal pronoun in these verses – in the NIV ‘I’ occurs eighteen times. A list of these illustrates the nature of God’s personal rule: ‘I myself will search for my sheep’ (v11); ‘I will look after my sheep’ (v12); ‘I will rescue them’ (v12); ‘I will bring them out from the nations’ (v13); ‘I will bring them into their own land’ (v13); ‘I will pasture them’ (v13); ‘I will tend them in good
pasture’ (v14); ‘I myself will tend my sheep’ (v15); ‘I will search for the lost’ (v16); ‘I will bind up the injured’ (v16); ‘the sleek and the strong I will destroy’ (v16); ‘I will shepherd the flock with justice’ (v16); ‘I myself will judge’ (v20); ‘I will save my flock’ (v22); ‘I will judge’ (v22); ‘I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David’ (v23); ‘I will be their God’ (v24); ‘I have spoken’ (v24).

Psalm 100

Psalm 100 concludes a short collection of Psalms which begins at Psalm 93. Sometimes they are called ‘homage Psalms’, as they relate to God’s reign and rule, yet God’s rule is again described in terms of a shepherd and their sheep.

‘Gates’ and ‘courts’ in verse 4 suggest the setting of worshippers entering the Temple. The opening invitation to worship is founded on three verbs, ‘shout’, ‘worship’, and ‘come’ and reflect a sense of drawing nearer to God with increasing closeness – moving from a shout to being in the very presence of God.

Translations of verse 2 vary between ‘serve the Lord’ and ‘worship the Lord’, but in a sense they are interchangeable, in much the same way that an act of worship is frequently called a service.

Psalm 95:1-7a

Like Psalm 100, Psalm 95 has been widely used in Christian worship (e.g. the Book of Common Prayer service for Morning Prayer). The stern conclusion to the Psalm is in contrast to the exuberant opening verses, but this reflects the realism of the prophets that fine gestures should be accompanied by fine deeds. Reference in verses 7b-11 to the time the people of Israel spent in the wilderness following the Exodus has led to the suggestion that Psalm 95 might have been composed for the Feast of Tabernacles, when the time in the wilderness was re-enacted.

In these verses, the atmosphere is one of joy (verse 1) in response to the greatness of God (verse 3). Again, God’s reign is described as that of a shepherd caring for their sheep (verse 7). All things belong to God and nothing, not even the sea is outside God’s control (verses 4 and 5). The Psalm describes the heights and depths of the all-encompassing reign of God (verse 4).

The worshipper is invited to respond with thanksgiving and music (verse 2), and in humility. The picture in verse 6 is of the worshipper humbly recognising God’s greatness by bowing down and kneeling.

Ephesians 1: 15-23
These verses describe the vast scope of the reign of Christ the King. The author of the letter is identified in 1:1 as Paul, who is thought to have been in prison in Rome at the time this letter was written. Although Ephesians may have been written for a number of churches in the Roman province of Asia, the important city of Ephesus itself was dominated by the temple of Artemis (Diana). It was in such a setting that the reign of Christ the King was celebrated in these verses.

It was usual for Greek letters to begin with a thanksgiving to the gods, and Paul has adapted this format in a Christian way with thanksgiving for what God has been doing in the lives of the readers of the letter. The thanksgiving is shorter than other Pauline letters and does not contain personal details; however the prayer is longer than in other epistles and contains more teaching.

Verses 22 and 23 detail the comprehensive scope of Christ’s reign; God has placed ‘all things’ under His feet, and appointed Him head over ‘everything’.

For the Christian Church, the purpose of Christ’s reign is startling in its promise and responsibility; Christ is head over everything ‘for the Church’, which is the ‘fullness’ of Christ.

The earlier parts of the prayer include a longing that through the Spirit the readers will know Christ better (verse 17) and His power and work in them (verse 19). This power is rooted in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus (verses 20 and 21).

Matthew 25:31-46

In these verses the reign of Christ the King is expressed in the judgment of the nations. The criterion for judgment is how ‘the nations’ (verse 32) have treated ‘one of the least’ of Christ’s people. ‘The least of these’ are categorised as those who are hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison.

There are strong echoes of the Old Testament. The gathering of all the nations for judgment is reminiscent of the vision in Joel 3:2. There the judge is God, but these verses in Matthew now describe the authority and kingship as belonging to Jesus. The language about the Son of Man comes from Daniel 7:9-14.

Jesus’ kingly reign and judgment is likened to a shepherd separating sheep and goats within a flock. Mixed flocks of sheep and goats were quite usual, but shepherds needed to separate them at night. The sheep were more valuable and they preferred to be out in the open at night, but the goats needed to be brought in and kept warm at nights.

Christ’s assertion that he is present in the needy stranger took the righteous and unrighteous by surprise. Neither expected to find Jesus among the hungry and thirsty. The reign of Christ the King takes people by surprise.
Sermon ideas

Christians often make excuses for the Church. We try to deflect attention from our failings and foibles by saying things like, ‘look at Jesus, not the Church – that’s the important thing.’ But the verses from Ephesians challenge this sort of escape route. There we are told that ‘God placed all things under (Christ’s) feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church...’ (3:22). Doesn't that mean that we should be able to say, ‘look at the Church, because here you will meet Jesus’. How true does that sound to us?

Christ will be met within the Church as the Church allows Christ to reign within the Church. What does the reign of Christ the King look like? The reading from Ezekiel encourages God’s people to trust that God’s reign is personal and persistent. The New Testament readings point to God’s reign being fulfilled in Christ. What are the examples of God’s personal and persistent reign today that can encourage us?

The challenge of the Gospel reading with the image of Christ judging the nations is searching. From the lives of Francis of Assisi and Martin of Tours there are classic illustrations of Christians recognised Christ in needy people and ministered Christ’s care. However there may be illustrations from the life of the congregation which illustrate this today. There may also be needs within the community that can be identified as a challenge to put Christ’s words into action now.

Time with children

The most obvious and practical reading on which to focus time with children is Matthew chapter 25 and Jesus’ assertion that when we care for those in need we are doing it for Him.

One approach could be to include the story of St. Martin of Tours (316-397 AD). Martin longed to be a Christian, but he was made to follow the same career as his father as an officer in the Roman army. At the time, young Christian men were not encouraged to be soldiers because that would mean swearing and oath to the Roman emperor as god. Once, on a cold night Martin was riding his horse outside the city of Amiens in France when he passed a man who was a beggar. The man was shivering in the cold, and Martin stopped, got off his horse and ripped his army cloak and gave half of it to the man so he could keep warm. That night Martin had a dream in which he saw Jesus wearing the cloak he had given the man who was begging by the roadside. The dream showed Martin the truth of what Jesus said – when you care for others you are doing it for Jesus.

Another approach could be to focus on places we might expect Jesus to be found. If there is access to multimedia screens, show pictures of local church buildings etc. and of hospitals, food banks, etc. Ask where people think they would be most likely to find Jesus.

If the congregation has links with specific projects locally or in other parts of the world, pictures of these could be shown to demonstrate how Christ is present in those who are in need and when we care for others we also honour him. Updates could also be given on the work being done and how the congregation is making a difference.
Prayers

Approach to God
Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;
for He is our God
and we are the people of His pasture,
the flock under His care. (Psalm 95:6-7)

Lord, we are here in this place to meet with you;
through the Holy Spirit lead us to encounter You today,
help us to know that You are God.

Through the news headlines of today, we declare with faith that You are God.
Within our community and church, we declare with faith that You are God.
Amid the unresolved fears of our lives, we declare with faith that You are God.
We bring to You now the worship of our lives.

Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;
for He is our God
and we are the people of His pasture,
the flock under His care.

Confession
Lord, like a shepherd, You never stop searching for Your people,
Your care for us anticipates our need.
Before we recognised we needed Your grace,
in love Jesus gave His life for our forgiveness.

We confess that we need Your forgiveness, we confess our sins:
You are the shepherd and we are Your flock, but we admit the times we have tried to take
Your place and take control ourselves.
We admit that we have not always trusted Your good news to be good for us. At times we
have pleaded with You to care for us,
but we have held back from caring for others and ignored the needs of others.

Lord, have mercy upon us. Forgive us in the name of Jesus.
Loving shepherd, teach us by the Holy Spirit to follow You in the days and places of the
weeks ahead.
Through Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.
Thanksgiving
Loving God, we thank You that in Christ
Your reign of love is endless and cannot be destroyed.
We thank You that You raised Jesus to life,
and that You have placed all things under His authority.
We give thanks for the community of the Church, giving thanks for one another here in this place and for the family of the Church throughout the world.
We give You thanks for the ways in which You have blessed our lives through the love and friendship of others.

Intercession
Loving God, we pray for the leaders of the world that they will look after the peoples of the nations as a shepherd looks after their flock.
In their decisions may they bind up the injured and strengthen the weak and seek Your justice in all things.
We pray in the name of Jesus.

We pray for the Church, for the congregation we belong to, and congregations with which we have links.

May the love of Christ rule among us that others may encounter Christ in us and come to trust in Him also.

We pray for others.
Lord Jesus, You ask us not to hurry past people in need, but to recognise You in them.
Give us Your generous compassion for others.

(In preparing prayers for others it may be appropriate to include prayers for those Jesus referred to in the reading from Matthew 25 and those involved locally, for example local foodbanks, hostels, hospitals, prisons etc.)

‘O God, our Heavenly Father, give us a vision of our world as Your love would make it: a world where the weak are protected and none go hungry or poor; a world where the benefits of civilised life are shared, and everyone can enjoy them; a world where different races, nations and cultures live in tolerance and mutual respect, a world where peace is built with justice, and justice is guided by love; and give us the inspiration and courage to build it, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.’ (1)

(1) Prayer by Geoffrey Brown and John Pridmore – St Martin-in-the-Fields’ Prayer for the World

Musical suggestions
CH4 59 – ‘Oh, come, and let us to the Lord’ – metrical version of Psalm 95
CH4 196 – ‘Come, now is the time to worship’ – a more contemporary call to worship song
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CH4 63 – ‘All people that in earth do dwell’ – Metrical version of Psalm100

CH3 2 – ‘Before Jehovah’s awesome throne’ – Paraphrase of Psalm 100 by Isaac Watts and John Wesley; verse 5 focuses on the reign of God

CH4 436 – ‘Christ triumphant, ever reigning’ – Hymn that speaks of the reign of Christ in more theological terms

CH4 394 – ‘He came to earth, not to be served’ – Hymn that speaks of the reign of Christ in more personal terms

CH4 468 – ‘Son of God, eternal Saviour’ – A prayer of longing for the reign of Christ in the world

CH4 503 – ‘I will offer up my life in spirit and truth’ – A more contemporary expression of personal submission to the reign of Christ

CH4 251 – ‘I, the Lord of sea and sky’ – The reign of the Lord expressed in care for others