

SERMON FOR CHRIST THE KING at 8am | 26.11.2023

Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 1: 15-23; St Matthew 25: 31-46

You won't be surprised that I have done quite a lot of reminiscing over the last month or so. As I sift through old papers and the pile of recycling gets bigger and bigger, I wonder what happened to people that I have had the privilege of working with for a period and then have lost touch with. Less positively I wade through old Minutes of meetings and wonder just how much fruitless time was spent over issues that really didn't matter at all. And I read old sermons with their references to what was happening that week five, ten, twenty years ago. Again all these things seemed terribly important at the time but are now just footnotes in history.

On Friday I took, probably, my last funeral at St James'. Fred Campbell was 96 and, not surprisingly, I read the passage from Ecclesiastes about time: *There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to embrace and a time to stand still, a time to be silent and a time to speak...*

And once I had finished ruminating on just what I have been doing with my time since March 2009 and wondering just what on earth I have done with all my time here, I got to thinking about strategies and plans and directions – and motives. Because so much of what parishes get up to seem random and disorganised, picking up small fragments here and there and trying to fit them into the overall picture. I think of the enthusiasm that people have brought when first getting caught up in Church and how so often that waned and then fizzled out: where are these people now?

Well of course lots of them are in far-away places. It has been wonderful to get messages from Texas and Singapore, Illinois and Paris as well as all over England.

To us, in purely human terms, this is all very unsatisfactory! And yet on this Feast of Christ the King, the final Sunday in the Church's year, we are given another perspective altogether. Ezekiel acknowledges that the sheep have been scattered, some for good reasons, some for bad reasons. But he speaks for God when he says that now he is bringing them back – back to a land where they will be properly cared for and fed. *I myself will be their shepherd: I will seek the lost and will bring back the strayed and I will bind up the injured and will strengthen the weak...*

Who is speaking here? God of course. Because he isn't suggesting that Ezekiel can do any of these things. Ezekiel isn't the one who will be bringing the sheep back. When I phoned someone this week to say goodbye, they told me, in no uncertain terms, that they didn't want to speak to me and slammed the phone down. To be fair they aren't very well but at the time I was just a bit put out. But that is the nature of pastoral work and it is also the way of God: we might like to think that we can reach everyone - and that everyone we meet will be happy to receive what we have to offer. But that wasn't true for Jesus and of course it isn't going to be true for us either.

But Ezekiel is telling us to keep our eyes looking up, not down. Ultimately, he will bring about that final reconciliation: he, not us. He will accept many of them into his heaven - and they won't necessarily be the people we will assume will be there either! All we can do is to share the Gospel as best we can, and leave the rest to God. Hard though it is, we cannot take final responsibility for absolutely everyone we have ever met. We often say that churches like St James' are like revolving doors - people coming and people going - and we are just the places where people will come and rest for a while.

Today's Gospel, however, doesn't allow us to stand back complacently and just let things happen. Yes we have met the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison (physically or those imprisoned by circumstances or addictions). But have we treated each of them as if we were meeting Christ? Sometimes - but I have to admit, not always - like the ever-persistent Christine at the Vicarage door yesterday who has told so many lies for so many years that I stopped doing anything for her. Am I right; am I wrong? The Lord alone knows.

And so these precious 8am Masses have always given me the time to ponder again on what we are about as a Church. In the stillness of these walls there have always been just enough of us to realise that we are caught up in some of the most serious matters of our day and to know that without the help of God we have neither answers nor the courage to cope. We stand each week at the judgment seat - knowing it also to be the seat of God's mercy - living in confidence that when we lay our needs and our hopes in his care, we are never alone and we will not fail.

Quickly returning to that passage in Ecclesiastes, we often feel we are wandering around in the dark: *what do we gain from all of our toil? I have seen what God gives to us. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has set eternity in our hearts; yet we cannot fathom what God has done, from beginning to end...*

And yet we have tried, in the company of Robert Addington and Will Elsworth Jones and all those who have been with us over the years but are here no longer, to find answers as we have stretched out our hands to receive the **Body and Blood of Christ, trusting that, as servants of **Christ the King**, that when we allow him to rule the way we think and work, he will never leave us.**

In the words of St Teresa of Avila I have used so often:

Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassionately on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.

Thank you for your wonderful support for these 8am Masses over the years. And may we never forget that, wherever we are, we are always a part of the **Body of Christ, united at his table: one hope, one faith, one Lord.**