Comments **Reign of Christ or Christ the King** **Year A**

Sunday between November 20 and 26 inclusive

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.
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Ezekiel 34:11-16,20-24 NRSV

Rulers in the Near East had long seen themselves as shepherds of their subjects. Ezekiel was sent by God to prophesy against Israel's kings, who had misused their people and were responsible for scattering them. The kings had taken the plenty of the land for themselves, rather than sharing it with their subjects. Written in a time of despondency (Judah had been invaded by Babylon in 587 BC), vv. 1-10 blame the people's sorry state on the kings: some people had dispersed around the Mediterranean; others were deported to Babylon; those left at home were no better off. In foreign lands, they have fallen prey to pagan beliefs. Rulers too are subject to God's law: they are individually responsible for the mess.

Now God will reverse the evil done by the bad human shepherds. He will seek out the sheep, and "rescue" (v. 12) them from wherever they have been scattered. God will "gather them" (v. 13) and bring them back, restore them, to Palestine; he will care for them (v. 14). He will aid the "lost" (v. 16), "strayed", "injured" and "weak" – but he will destroy the "fat and the strong", i.e. those who rule them. God will give them justice: rulers will be accountable for their actions. God will judge, and differentiate between, the "fat sheep" (v. 20, the overfed rich oppressors, the ungodly) and the "lean" (the underfed poor oppressed, the godly). "I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged" (v. 22). The sheep must behave properly, and submit to "one shepherd" (v. 23), a descendant of "David" (vv. 23, 24), a "prince", whom God will place over them. There will be peace, prosperity and safety from attack by other nations; then Israel will truly know her God. Jesus built on this passage to express the nature of his mission.

Psalm 100 NRSV

All people everywhere ("all the earth") are invited to joyfully worship God. Both the Temple and royal palaces had "gates" (v. 4) and "courts", so God the king, present in the Temple and reigning from there, is envisaged. All are to acknowledge that Israel's god, the LORD, is the god (v. 3): he created us, we belong to him and he cares for us. He is ultimate goodness (v. 5): per his covenant, he loves – and is faithful to – us, our ancestors and descendants.

Ephesians 1:15-23 NRSV

Paul has written of the Father's wisdom and insight in making known to us his will, his plan for completion of the restoration of the faithful to oneness with him, as told by Jesus (vv. 8, 9). God's plan embraces both Jews and Gentiles, bringing them together in one Christian community. That this is happening he sees as evidence of God's ability to break down diverse barriers, and to bring the world to unity in Christ.

And so, in vv. 15-16, he is delighted to hear of the successful missionary activity by people he does not know at first hand. Their "faith" (commitment to Christ) and fraternal love (love of "all the saints", Christians both Jewish and Gentile) go hand in hand: faith involves appreciating God's great love for humanity demonstrated in the Father's giving of the Son. That "your" (v. 15) refers to new Christians is indicated by "as you come to know him" in v. 17: Paul prays that these (relatively) new converts may receive "a spirit of wisdom and revelation" as each progressively come to understand God more and more. It is not just *digested knowledge* ("wisdom") that they will receive, but also "revelation", what God will show of himself and his ways, his manifest character, his greatness, "glory", and the fruit of interaction of knowledge with experience. The objective (v. 18) is that, illuminated by innermost conviction ("with the eyes of your heart"), they may attain a maturer knowledge of God in three ways: (1) in spiritual growth ("hope") being those whom God has called; (2) the "glorious inheritance" Gentile Christians now share with their Jewish brethren; and (3) experience of the tremendous power of God as he works in their lives. Paul's experience speaks here: God showed him mercy when he was a persecutor of Christians. Then v. 20: this power that they now experience is what the Father used in raising Christ and having him share in the divine glory. Christ has also conquered all alien spiritual powers ("far above all rule ...", v. 21) and pagan gods ("every name that is named"). God has made "all things" (v. 22) subject to humanity; the Father has given Christ to the church as ruler over all things spiritual. The church is one in Christ and thus is able to share in Christ's exaltation, Christ being the complete embodiment of God, who is in the process of filling (making good) all things. It is through the church that God pervades the world with his goodness.

Matthew 25:31-46 NRSV

Vv. 14-30 are the Parable of the Talents. Jesus has used it to stress the importance of fidelity to him and his mission while he is away. Here Jesus tells us the kind of conduct, of morality, towards others expected of the faithful – and the consequences of not caring for others. Sheep and goats behave differently but in Palestine they were fed together. At the end of the era, when Christ comes again, he will act for the Father ("sit on ... [his] throne", v. 31). He will separate the "sheep" (v. 32) from the "goats", assigning the former to a place of honour ("at his right hand", v. 33) and the latter to dishonour. He, as "king" (v. 34) will invite the godly (or faithful), those whom the Father has pre-ordained for this, to live with him ("the kingdom"), a state that existed before creation ("from the foundation of the world"). Why? Because the godly have fulfilled God's expectation: in reaching out to the disadvantaged they have, in fact, been reaching out to him (v. 40). We are all part of his family. But the "goats", those who have ignored the needy, will be permanently separated from God, be unhappy, and be punished, for they have failed to see Christ in people. The "righteous" (v. 46) are the faithful, the godly, those who understand that to serve humanity is to serve Christ – and do so.