

Ezekiel 34 11-16 and Matthew 25 31-46

Ian phoned me last Sunday evening asking if I could preach and shortly afterwards I read the passage from Matthew which I found rather sobering. Because I had recently meditated on my own mortality.

It was sparked by the excellent address by Helen Swaris at the annual memorial service two weeks earlier on her experiences of grief including that for her sister Margaret who died unexpectedly. Joy and I had met this lovely lady several times and she would only have been a year or so younger than my current age. A few days later I was stunned by the sudden death of Malcolm Cameron who for many years along with his wife Hazel sat here before moving to Suffolk. Causing me to reflect on how organised are my affairs and what beneficial difference have I made for others.

Followed by the Remembrance Service – with me thinking about what if I had been born a generation or two earlier. And just before the call I had watched a programme on comedian Bobby Ball who died shortly after contracting Covid. As one who had struggled with exams for a few years in my teens the reading caused me to think about my examination before God.

Chapters 24 and 25 of Matthew are regarded as one of Jesus' sermons spoken to his Disciples on the Mount of Olives a couple of days before his crucifixion.

We read in Chapter 24 that after leaving the Temple Jesus comments that every stone of the building will be thrown down and later they privately ask him **when will this happen and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age.**

Jesus warns them about the signs – those claiming to be Christ, false prophets, wars, that they his disciples would be persecuted and put to death, other events and then **At that time the son of Man will appear in the sky, and all nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory.**

Jesus tells them in verse 36 **No one knows about that day or hour, not even the Son, but only the father.** The not knowing comes out also in the Parable of the Ten Virgins at the start of Chapter 25.

This is the Sunday before Advent. Advent is the period when we look forward to more than Jesus' birth but also to his second coming. Advent has been secularly high jacked with chocolate Advent Calendars and the commercial pressures to spend, spend and spend in the frantic rush to over indulge. Whilst churches have focused on generating good warm feelings through their Carol and Crib Services with judgement and fear of God quietly forgotten even though my Bible reading this morning included **the Lord delights in those who fear him.**

In ages past Advent was treated like Lent as a period of meditation, reflection, confession and repentance. The Lectionary theme for this Sunday is Christ the King. Our modern view of Monarchy has little commonality with the meaning in the past. Our Queen is a figurehead with Ceremonial duties. She does not have the power as monarchs once did to go to war or to decide if someone lived or died.

Although we are unlikely to see his second coming but we will still have to stand before our king. Our reading and this mornings songs paint a lovely picture of Christ **sitting on his throne in heavenly glory** with the nations gathered before him – although it is assumed to mean members of God's community they are split as one would separate sheep and goats.

The righteous sheep on his right are told you **are blessed by my father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you** because that they had looked after Jesus when he was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, lacking clothes, sick and in prison.

The righteous sheep respond **we didn't see you** but Jesus replies what you did for the least you did for me. The second group are cast out as they hadn't fed or tended the needy and they cry out **if we had known it was you we would have done it.**

You will recall Jesus told his Pharisees critics they were blind hypocrites. They strove to be Holy but Jesus is saying be compassionate – there are always opportunities to be compassionate and a blessing - love is more important – loving one's neighbour as one's self.

I confess that I know that there have been times when I have not been as kind or gentle as I might have been and it grieves me. A greater concern is not knowing and not knowing the extent of me being blind to those in need, deaf to the pain behind the words of others, having a closed heart due to being absorbed with my own issues, and been like those on the Jericho road and passed by.

The verses before our Gospel reading is The Parable of the Talents which Ian spoke on last week. Cardinal Newman apparently used to say **each of us has been put here with a particular calling in mind which only we can do**. What might Christ say on our record.

Judgement and redemption are prime themes in the Old Testament. God's people time and time again drifted away and suffered as a consequence. Ezekiel, was in a foreign land, one of the exiles in Babylon, best known for his vision of a valley full of dry bones. His key message, found in our first reading, is that God has not abandoned his people, and has the power to restore them to their homeland, nationhood and covenant faith.

In the early part of chapter 34 of Ezekiel castigates the leaders, **Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves** and allowed the sheep to be food for wild animals. Against the wonderful promises of God's love – this is the basis for Jesus calling himself the Good Shepherd. Our reading has ten promises of I will including

**I will search for my sheep. I will look after them. I will rescue them. I will bring them into their own land. I will tend my sheep and make them lie down. I will search for the lost. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak.**

We have all sinned, we all fall short of the glory of God, so if you are feeling unworthy or like me have the residue of some teenage fears of exams. Take heart. Jesus died for us and Jesus wants us to pass his examination by rescuing us and to bring us into his green pastures.

Mindful of Cardinal Newman's words **each of us has been put here with a particular calling in mind which only we can do**. A person I know well prayed for years that God would use her and she is now in a significant ministry role and now prays that God will use her son.

I would like to pray for us all

Lord we are sorry when we have been blind deaf or indifferent to those in need or hurting. **Pause** We are sorry when we have shied away from the promptings to the calling you have in mind for us.

As we move into advent -fill our hearts with your love. Open our spiritual ears and heart so that we can be your hands, feet and voice to share your love. And to do the things that only we can do. Amen

So when we get to our final day standing before Jesus- instead of could have done better may the greeting be well done Good and faithful servant. Perhaps we will do a jig of joy in God's garden like Nobby Stiles after England won the World Cup in 1966.