RCL Year A -34th in Ordinary/last before Advent

Readings: Ezekiel 34:11-16; Matthew 25:31-46

The key to unlocking the meaning of the Matthew 25 passage is found in Ezekiel 34; that is why the lectionary compilers have put them together for today. And since Matthew threatens hell fire for those who get it wrong, it is a passage that is probably worth trying to understand!

So let us start with a quick look at Ezekiel 34. He was a priest deported to Babylon in the first tranche of exiles from Jerusalem in 597BC when much of the wealthy and educated classes were deported, leaving behind the lower social groups and a puppet king: King Zedekiah.

Ezekiel came to the conclusion that the exile was God’s punishment on the nation and he took responsibility for his own part in the disaster. In Ezekiel 34:1-10 he takes the traditional metaphor of the shepherd and the flock. As a priest, he was one of the appointed shepherds over God’s flock, the people of Judah. Having looked after themselves more than the people and having appeased the wealthy and the royal palace more than they have obeyed God, Ezekiel sees that he and the whole nation deserve their punishment. The subsequent vision of the bones scattered in the dry valley which we all know so well, is the story of Ezekiel finding the faith, even in a foreign land, to believe that God will restore the people after the Exile and re-establish his kingdom in Jerusalem.

In today’s passage, Ezekiel has the vision about HOW God will restore Zion. God Himself will come to Zion as the Good Shepherd. God alone has the ability to gather up the scattered flock and bring them into the good pasture and into the only safe sheep pen. God will tend the broken lambs ignored by the priests and gather in the scattered sheep of His flock.

When a passage such as this is combined with the Suffering Servant prophecies of Isaiah of Babylon and the Son of Man of Daniel’s prophecy who comes and sits at God’s right hand in heaven, we can see how the picture comes together in Jesus, explaining why the Christians believed that Jesus wasn’t just another prophet like Elijah or Jeremiah, but someone uniquely authoritative, because when Jesus comes to Jerusalem, he comes as God’s vice-regent on earth, Jesus is God the Good Shepherd coming to his flock.

II

This passage unlocks the meaning of Matthew 25, which, like last week’s parable of the Talents, has two levels of meaning, being firstly the situation in AD29 when Jesus came to Jerusalem, and secondly, the application of final judgement on subsequent generations.

Let us take the first of those two levels. Jesus, who in John’s Gospel, claims to be the Good Shepherd and the Door of the Sheep pen, comes to Jerusalem as God, the Good Shepherd to gather his flock and appoint new, trustworthy shepherds, that is, the Apostles and those who follow them in pastoring the people of God after them.

Jesus dismisses the existing shepherds because they have failed in exactly the same way as the shepherds of Ezekiel’s generation. They have tended only to their own comfort and have done nothing to care for those in their charge.

As usual it is the poorest and humblest which have been abandoned. But Jesus raises these up. Whenever the priests have failed the poorest and humblest, whenever they have refused them food, water, welcome or care in their time of need, it is Christ himself who has been ignored and because Jesus is God’s Son, it is God himself they have betrayed.

They have failed in their duty. They have failed to recognise God in their midst, in the poor and humble, in the most simple soul in the foulest prison. So they have sorted themselves into SHEEP AND GOATS. By their own blindness to God’s call upon their lives, they have chosen to become GOATS rather than the SHEEP they claimed to be. They are no longer God’s people. Jesus is calling together a New Israel through the 12 Apostles and giving them new shepherds to care for their souls.

The TRAGEDY is compounded, however, that even now in the presence of Christ, the priests have still not recognised God in their midst. They have, to quote from Luke 19, “failed to recognise the time of God’s visitation.” And so they will add sin upon sin, by rejecting Christ and having him put to death. Those who thought they were sheep of God’s flock and shepherds appointed by God from within that flock have become GOATS. They do not belong, but those of “all the nations” (Matt25.32) may now become God’s flock.

III

This brings us now to consider the second level of interpretation of this passage: what it says to generations following the days of Jesus and the apostles.

To start with it warns those who claim to belong to Christ’s flock and those who are appointed to be the shepherds that God demands obedience to the Gospel. There is still the same danger that we interpret our status as God’s flock as simply a position of privilege or even power.

God requires us to recognise the authority of his Son Jesus Christ, unlike the shepherds of Jerusalem. It is ironical that the despised shepherds of Bethlehem recognise the authority of Christ when the appointed shepherds of Jerusalem do not. And in recognising Christ, do we have the humility of the Three Magi to bend the knee in worship? Or do we just enlist the name of Jesus to justify what we want to do and what we want to think anyway? Christ is our supreme example, our highest authority, our Lord of all lords and King of all kings.

The question of how Christians recognise the authority of God in the Church has been a point of debate since the Reformation. The choice seems to come down to having a either a Pope or a Paper Pope – the Bible. When Protestants look over the wall at the Catholics, we criticise them for being told what to believe and for not thinking for themselves. When Catholics look over the fence at us Protestants, they say that we have turned the Bible into a Paper Pope and made ourselves Pope by deciding for ourselves as individuals what we believe and what we don’t believe and that’s why the protestants keep on splitting into ever more factions, dividing the Body of Christ into ever smaller atomistic parts.

So we need to ask ourselves how well we recognise Christ’s authority when Christ is saying something we don’t want to hear, or have never heard before. Are our eyes and ears open to the authoritative bidding of Christ when he speaks to us through new people, unexpected people, or people we don’t immediately like?

Since the whole earth is the Lord’s, it is not just the Church that shall be judged as to how it recognises the authority of God over their lives. As Romans 2 tells us, even those who do not know Christ have the innate ability through their conscience to recognise the existence of the Creator and thereby the sanctity of the creation and of fellow human beings.

So it is not just the Church that will be called to account. It will be all those who exercise authority in the world, who must do so in accordance with the principles of the Kingdom of God.

In that kingdom, the poor are given food, water, clothing, shelter and care in their hour of need. And it is by this the world, not just the Church, will be judged. It is the calling of the Church to live by such a Gospel ethic and set an example of how all people should live, how all societies care for the poor and vulnerable, how all political systems should value all the people and not just respond to the needs of the richest few.

Looking at the world and the Church, it appears we still have a way to go.