

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Christ the King – Year A

RCL Readings – Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

ACNA Readings – Ezekiel 34:11-20; Psalm 95; 1 Corinthians 15:20-28; Matthew 25:31-46

Introduction. The Feast of Christ the King was established in 1925 by the Roman Catholic Church and now is widely copied by Anglicans and others. It started in response to growing secularism in the West that ignored the sovereignty of God over human history. Its application to the West is far greater now than at its inception. In addition, its formal title – The Solemnity of Jesus Christ, King of the Universe – recaptures a title of God from the earliest chapters of The Hebrew Scriptures. Every theologically orthodox church can affirm this role of the Messiah – the Christ.

Common Theme. The person of the risen and exalted Jesus – his character and his role – is the focus of the biblical themes of this feast. The lectionary connects the Hebrew Bible's ancient inspiration and brings it forward to Jesus and the inauguration of the New Covenant. Ezekiel describes the Lord's role as the shepherd of his people. In the gospel, Jesus describes the fulfilment of a prophetic and cosmic court scene that marks the end of time. The Psalm features the worthiness of the King of the Universe to be joyfully recognized by his subjects. Ephesians – following the declaration of Jesus' character – identifies him as the personification of the unlimited power of God, which is expressed in Judaism as God being the King of the Universe.

Ezekiel 34:11-24. This passage focuses on the role of human shepherds and the malpractice of spiritual leaders so wicked that the Lord replaces them. The earliest reference to the Lord as shepherd occurs in Psalm 23 and recurs in Psalm 81:1. The frequency of the simile increases through the prophets until finally being assumed by Jesus in John 14:10. This declaration that connects to the feast of Christ the King – revealing Jesus' Messianic and divine identity with this ancient illustration of one aspect of his, and the Father's, character.

It is particularly significant in Ezekiel because of his catalytic role in calling Israel to repentance from his place of exile in Babylon. Jewish tradition considers Ezekiel the inspiration – taken up by Ezra and Nehemiah – who led Israel's revival nearly two centuries later. But only in Jesus is the ultimate renewal and success of the Father's covenant possible.

Three other observations may be useful. The concluding picture of God's judgement – the separating of sheep and goats – may provide a transition to the gospel judgement portion, that like his Father, Jesus is both shepherd and judge. Contemporary listeners generally prefer Jesus the shepherd to Jesus the judge.

Psalm 100 & 95. Both Psalms are praise-focused. 95:1-7 extols the Lord as the saviour who is both all-powerful and creator. Psalm 100 declares and honours the Lord for his faithfulness. All are appropriate attributes of God that could determine worship music and the substance of a prayer. The collect for the feast connects to the attributes of grace and redemption.

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Ephesians 1:15-23. Exegeting Ephesians 1:10 to emphasize that God chose to “gather together...all things in Messiah” states dramatically how much honour and awe is due Jesus from us. The following paragraph – verses 15-23 – is a long, Pauline sentence that ends in a grand and poetic ode to Jesus. The grandeur of Paul’s language indicates that contemporary disciples should be cautious about undervaluing the power and perfection of the risen Jesus. He cannot be merely a friend; he is God.

Contemporary listeners will struggle to grasp the distance between us and God. The egalitarian world of the West trains our intuition to resist it. “They are only human” is the critique. That is correct about human leaders, but it is wrong about Jesus. If the preacher can capture that divine difference, he will be a blessing to his listeners. It may take an illustration to bring it home to modern emotions. Daniel 10 gives a picture of the appropriate response, but being a biblical text may, in itself, have the same limitations as Ephesians.

Matthew 25:31-46. Matthew deliberately refers to the *Son of Man* image in Daniel 7. The preacher may wish to emphasize that Christians were not the discoverer of this interest in Daniel; it reflected second-temple thinking among Jews about the Messiah. With the gospel writers comes the addition of deity to the Messianic thinking, emphasising the two thrones imagery strengthens the understanding of Jesus as the Son of God as well as the potential divine reality that God could “take on flesh” and mortality to bring about his desires in his creation.

The phrase Jesus used in verses 40 and 45, “one of the least of these my brethren” has been a topic of scholarly debate.

Four theories exist:

- 1) Jesus refers to the apostles and disciples that followed him,
- 2) he refers to all disciples present and future,
- 3) he particularly has in mind the Jewish people or his Jewish disciples, and/or
- 4) anyone who is poor and in some kind of need.

The trials of the first group came true historically. The trials of the second, third, and fourth groups continue through today.

Important as that argument is, the purpose of the lectionary readings is Jesus’ divine identity as the one who will judge on the *Great Day of the Lord* – or at the Great White Throne of Judgment, or simply that Day of Judgment. From Exodus 12, on the night of the first Passover, God possessed the role of ultimate judge over life and death. He still does. This title, function, and earned character are true of Jesus also.

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ACNA Readings

1 Corinthians 15:20-28. In this passage, Paul gives a summary of what we call salvation history, starting with the fact that Jesus has been raised from the dead. This comes on the back of an earlier part of this chapter confirming all the sightings of Jesus and why there is proof of his resurrection (1 Cor 15:5-8). He also calls Jesus the “first fruits” (v. 20), which is a phrase full of meaning. Jews as far back as the Pentateuch (cf. Deut 18:4 where Israel had been told to offer the first fruits of their harvest to God). As time moved on, the first fruits came to be offered in the temple and were then distributed to the Levitical priests.

Paul makes a clear statement that Christ is the first fruit of the resurrection, implying that others will follow in the resurrection. This reference to First Fruits is not just an empty turn of phrase but a reference to the Feast of First Fruits. The Church has done a good job of understanding Jesus' death within the context of Passover, helped by the Passover imagery of the Gospels and that Paul overtly calls Jesus our Passover lamb (1 Cor 5:7). The eight-day Passover season is actually three festivals occurring concurrently: Passover, Unleavened Bread, and First Fruits. While the Pharisaical (and now rabbinical) interpretation of Leviticus 23:9-11 puts the Feast of First Fruits on the day after the first day of Passover, the Sadducees (who controlled the temple in the first century) read "the day after the Sabbath" as the Sunday after Passover. Jesus was resurrected on the Sunday after Passover, as we affirm with our continued tradition of Sunday worship. Jesus – the first fruit of the dead – was raised back to life on the Feast of First Fruits.

First Fruits is also connected to the great Jewish feast of the Harvest of First Fruits, known as *Shavuot/Pentecost* (Exod 23:16). Offering the first fruits communicated an expectation of a fuller harvest as a blessing from God. We begin to see the beginning of that fuller harvest in Messiah in the Pentecost recorded in Acts 2, where we see 3,000 baptised on the same day. The work of calling in believers continues to this day.

The sacrifice of Jesus is not an isolated event for Paul but part of the history of God and humanity. He takes us in verse 21 back to Adam and begins a comparison between Adam and Jesus. Adam brought death through his sin; Jesus brings resurrection through his sacrifice, a point reiterated in verse 22. Following Adam leads to death; following Jesus leads to life. Verse 23 is a further repetition of Jesus being the first fruits leading to a large harvest when he comes to us. More than that in verse 24, we learn that at the end of this age, when Jesus will have brought his kingdom to fulfilment, he will hand it back to the Father, but not before every power, dominion and authority has been destroyed.

God has always said, as seen in the 10 commandments, that there is no God except him, and the end of the age will restore everything back to the one true God of Israel. Too often people are trying to second guess when Jesus will return, but he himself said only the Father knows (Matt 24:36). Paul tells us it will

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never happen until all enemies are put under the feet of Jesus and eventually, even death is destroyed. There is clearly some way to go, but if we hold on to the first fruits teaching, we know that the harvest can and indeed must follow.

About the RCL author. The Rev. Canon Daryl Fenton assumed the role of executive director for CMJ in Israel in 2019, after having served in the same capacity for CMJ's USA branch. Cn. Daryl previously served as canon to Archbishop Robert Duncan of the Anglican Church in North America, overseeing mission relationships. He also served as canon and chief operating officer for the Anglican Communion Network, a founding organization of the ACNA. He continues to serve the current archbishop, the Most Rev. Foley Beach, as Canon for the Middle East. Daryl is married to Sandy. They have two grown children, as well as three grandchildren. The Fentons reside in Jerusalem, Israel.

About the ACNA author. The Rev Mark K. Madeley was born in 1968. He is an Anglican minister ordained into the Church of England in 1993. Having worked in Derbyshire and Yorkshire, Mark moved to Weston-super-Mare (just south of Bristol on the West Coast) in 2012 where he is currently rector of St. Nicholas with St. Barnabas. Mark also owns a travel company, MIB Travel, and since 2010, he has been operating all of the CMJ Shoreside Study Tours originating in the UK. He is passionate about people going to Israel and learning the truth according to Scripture. He is also president of Christian Friends of Magen David Adom and a vice president of Magen David Adom UK, the UK arm of the Israel ambulance service. He is validated by Durham University as a distance tutor and marks theological and Church history assignments. He is married to Caroline and has two teenage children, Rachel and Benjamin.