Sermon for November 22nd: Christ the King.
Ruler of our Days

The lectionary journey for November has been building to today's climax. Three weeks ago we read from Revelation 7 with its great multitude of every nation, tribe people and language standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb: All Saints Day followed by All Soul's Day. A fortnight ago, John spoke of oil and light, foolish and wise. Preparing us. Be alert, awake, aware. Last week, Susan spoke of the rich resources God has gifted us: how we are privileged, how we hold or withhold our wealth and our tendency to put away for the rainy day. Justice: separation, judgement, distinction lies before us. So, today—we are back at the throne. Before the King! Crunch time! How do we, can we, will we avoid the weeping and gnashing of teeth?

The Old Testament, the Psalm, the gospel are about sheep. But Matthew really is a cow of a passage! Hard to respond to with: *This the gospel (good news) of the Lord. Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ!* It's one of the most awkward passages in Scripture, especially if we believe that God is love, and who, because of that love, in the long run will not condemn, or cast anyone aside. If we believe that the attribute of love outweighs all other attributes that apply to God in the Scriptures, then we are sure to have difficulty with this passage.

Sheep and judgment link our readings. Ezekiel speaks to shepherds: people like me, Lauleti, Andy, Elders, those on Church Council; but not just church leaders, anyone who leads; appointed or elected, who have of oversight of people, religious or secular. He speaks of the expectations placed on leaders and the quality of their care. Let's think carefully and pray fervently this week as we cast our ballot for those we desire to be our leaders! Do we place more weight on what we read in self-serving social media, or the press with all its biases or on the quick TV grabs. Matthew paints a broad canvas - people of **all** nations are assembled before the throne. Jesus, Son of God, King: will rule, judge, pass sentence. God in his care for us has provided to protect us from corruption from within and attack from without.

There are no barriers of age, colour, culture before the king. No class or claim to superiority because of economic advantage. No distinction between land-owner or hired worker. Just people. We often apply this passage of judgment to individuals. Yet it is the people of the nations, not just their leaders, who are gathered. It is the nation that gives an account to God. Our nation. Even today this passage packs a political punch - it speaks to the way we as a nation, as a state, as community, choose to act together, structurally, intentionally; to care for the powerless, disenfranchised, the needy, the vulnerable and the lawbreakers. When choosing our leaders we need to discern to what extent does political persuasion determine how we express our faith or in what way does Christ shape how we, or those we elect, enact their politics.

There is distinction, accountability and separation. Sheep on one hand, goats on the other. In Jesus' day the sheep and goats were of one flock. To the untrained eye, a sheep and a goat looked alike and sounded alike. They shared the same animal-hood, were raised and kept only because of what they could provide for the owner - wool, meat, milk and leather. Both were cared for by the one shepherd.

The Judge isn't interested what animals call themselves. Who or what **we** think we are is irrelevant. Someone made a quite profound: statement: Standing in a garage does not make us a car! This can be extrapolated to: Sitting in church does not make us a Christian. Separation isn't on who we are, but on what we do: the basis of care.

However, having said this, in reality, life isn't as black and white as we want or hope it to be. Judging others, looking for, or at, the speck in another person's eye whilst having a plank hanging out of our own is a trap for all. There's no either-or choice; no room for self-justifying excuses. The world is **not** made up of only sheep or goats. There are shoats, and geep and a host of other

variations. There are even black sheep in our family or community who we prefer to never talk about!

Ezekiel adds to our understanding. Being born sheep, doesn't give rise to any natural sense of privilege or favour. No-one is born christian - we must choose - and the choice is not of gaining privilege but of giving: of servanthood; of being before doing.

For God, judgment is a sign of loving, a sign of inclusion, a sign of care. However, specific care is needed. Matthew lists those things that characterise sheep from goats. The true left or right in politics. Judgment is in terms of BEING as well as of DOING. BEING lovers of God means that we ARE to be lovers of all God's creation: flora, fauna, the land, all people, irrespective of race, colour, creed etc. As lovers of God's creation we are required to DO the loving things which are a reflection of that love of God alive and at work in **our** lives.

We are exhorted to think soberly, to examine our motives carefully for judgment is not according to acts. That's justification by works. Some think that to do good things, go to church, put $x in the plate, visit the sick, the imprisoned, give clothes to the poor etc then God will owe us and we would justly deserve the reward He offers. But these things come naturally: for even goats care for each other.

We are called to give ourselves in love. We can only do this if we submit to a loving authority; to Jesus, our Shepherd, our Lord, our King. Allowing God's love to work through us does not come naturally. If we really ARE the sheep of His pasture, if the Lord really is our shepherd, then the things we DO flow out of who we ARE. His sheep. The care and material assistance we offer others will come purely out of our love for God. It is God centred; not self-centred or self-fulfilling.

Practical care flows from us supernaturally in love because of God's supernatural love for us in Christ which, at his word and by His Spirit, has flowed into us. Thus Matthew and Ezekiel speak volubly to our place and time. Some rhetorical questions to ponder with a cup of tea or coffee this afternoon: What is our motivation for care - brownie points or obedience? To whom is our care and service directed - our needs or the needs of others? What does our care and service cost us: in time, resources, abilities? Are there times when we are more like goats in sheep's clothing, sitting here, dressed like the sheep, mouthing all the right hymns or responses without doing it?

Verse 4 of what was once this congregation's Mission Hymn reads:

Christ the focus of our worship,
Christ the purpose of our care,
Christ the source of all our service,
in people's need we find Christ there.

Is this true in your experience? It can be. Is Christ the centre of your life? Choose. Today. Invite Him to be the Ruler of your life. This is truly what your baptism is: preparation for and commitment and an empowerment to serve and care for others

The Lord, the Shepherd became a sheep as we are. He became the Lamb on the throne - the Lion of Judah, the King who offered his life to God in exchange for ours.

We are invited to follow this way of Jesus, not that we may avoid punishment and eternal separation **from** God, but that we may enjoy eternal reconciliation **with** God. Forever! Amen.