

Weekly Reading – Monday, November 17, 2008

This Sunday, November 23, is the final Sunday of the present liturgical year. The following Sunday begins a new year with the first Sunday of Advent. This final Sunday is known, variously, as "Christ the King," and "Reign of Christ," Sunday. Each of the three texts gives us some depiction of the triumphant rule and reign of Christ or the Messiah.

Ezekiel 34: 11 - 16, 20 - 24

The governing image here is that of the sheep and shepherd. The flock has become scattered, lost, entangled, bruised and battered. God himself will gather his flock, rescue them and bring them home. Moreover, God will judge between the sheep, casting out the fat sheep who push the others around. Given the issue of obesity in our society today the separation of the fat sheep and thin sheep has a particular resonance. Of course, one might argue that obesity is a particular affliction of the poor, while the wealthy find ways to remain sleek. At any rate, God is the persistent and caring shepherd who seeks his own, finds them where they have been lost, rescues them from various snares and brings them home. And in the final verses, God sets his Messiah as the shepherd of his flock to rule over them. The image raises another question: do we, you and I, and humankind generally, need a shepherd? Or are we sufficient unto ourselves? Or to put it a slightly different way: do we need a Savior? Or, "I can handle it myself, thanks all the same!" This is one of the challenges in modern, western culture and in mainline churches in particular. Christian faith says that human nature needs a Savior, that we can't do this all on our own. We really are sheep who need a shepherd.

Ephesians 1: 15 - 23

And Paul carries forward this theme of our need for a shepherd, a Savior. Speaking to the Christians at Ephesus, Paul prays (beautifully) that they may come to know their shepherd, Jesus Christ, even better. He prays that they/ we may grow in a spirit of wisdom and revelation, and experience the enlightening of the eyes of our heart. Most of all, he prays that they may know in their lives and life together that same power that raised Christ from the dead and raised him to rule at the right hand of God, "who placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything." There it is again. Someone is in charge . . . and it's not us! When in Brooklyn recently I got a good laugh out of the distillation of the Bible's message offered by David Fisher, pastor at Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims: "I am God and you're not." God is on the throne, we're not.

Matthew 25: 31 - 46

This final parable in the great triptych of Matthew 25 brings together both elements of the other two readings. We have sheep and goats and judgment between the two, as in Ezekiel. And we have Christ ruling and reigning, King Jesus, on the throne. In this respect, we also get a great summary of two of Matthew's dominant themes. One of those is the theme of love of neighbor. Did you/we really love the neighbor? Did we care and did we minister to Christ hidden in the least of these? That's one theme. The ethical demand of the gospel. The other great theme of Matthew is the rule and authority of Christ, who is the new Moses. Like

Moses he has come down from the Mount with a new and authoritative teaching. Here the two are combined. Christ the King sits upon the throne. And Christ judges between the peoples on the basis of care for the weak, the lost, the least and the vulnerable. The challenge, it often seems, is to hold the two themes together. One might say that evangelicals have a good grip on the kingly rule of Christ and of the human need to acknowledge such rule. One might say mainliners have a good grip on the ethic of neighbor love, service and social justice. But the two together?