

Today is the Feast of Christ the King, the day in the life of the church when we celebrate the reign of Christ. It is also the last Sunday of the Church year. We don't make much of this feast day, as we would have once, but it is important day to mark.

It is a good day for us to look back on the year that has been and to give thanks for all how we have experienced and encountered with God in the past 12 months. Usually I would invite us on this Sunday to give thanks for the year that has past and notice that God was with us – but I think for many of us, feeling thankful this year might be challenging. But one of the gifts of faith is that it is with us in times of plenty and times of less. We can notice God with us even when we are struggling with our memories.

Most of the past 12 months for many of us has been spent in lock down or restricted experiences of community. Though for many life has changed very little. I had one Mum text me during the week to see if she could pop past and collect something from the church. I said we were in lockdown and I was also isolating. She commented that she had forgotten as for her, life was no different just the same rush between school, kids and work. I was really taken back. Similarly I heard an interview with Nigella Lawson during the week who again commented – I have worked from home for most of my adult life; very little has changed for me. And yet for others, everything has changed. They have lost people they loved, lost jobs, lost routine, lost access to things they enjoy or even face to face conversations with another living human being. Our experiences of the past 12 months are as varied as they have always been. The question then today is where we have seen the reign of God present in our journey. When have we taken time to notice that God is with us in this mess?

So here we are – one year older – one year more faithful – one more year of questions for God – one more year of encountering God's spirit in our lives – I wonder, what have we to be thankful for?

To be able to do this wonder if we need to have the what Paul prayers for the Ephesians, that God *“may give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know God , 18 so that, with the eyes of our heart enlightened, we may know what is the hope to which God has called each of us” (1:17-18).*

The hope of the writer to the Ephesians gains greater meaning when we reflect on this Sunday in the liturgical year. To see the reign or presence of God we need to have wisdom and courage to see God's Hope especially in the most challenging of times.

As we enter the New Year next Sunday, and the season of Advent we will be invited to consider what it means to be the people of God in this place. What does it mean for us as we live out our faith? This will be our focus for the coming months as we are invited to take time to reflect and share with

one another our experiences of faith in our day to day lives. The reality is we spend very little time in church, and so our experience and reflection on God, as you know, is actually much broader than our experience of worship together. As we notice God's Kingdom this year we can ask – when have I seen God in my work place, in my children, in my parents, in my friends, in my play? When have I responded to God's prompting ?

These questions have a resonance with our gospel reading from Matthew today. Today we have the final parable in a series of images which Matthew creates of the Kingdom of God. While the last three weeks the images have seemed harsh and at times confronting, today Matthew describes for us an image in which all the nations (not just the chosen) come before God. And in this image, the sorting is not based on race or doctrine or even birth. In this image, God's grace responds to the expression of love, hope and humility to others.

Jesus calls the sheep those who are "blessed by my Father" (25:34). Who are the blessed ones? The blessings of the beatitudes foreshadow Jesus' eschatological teaching. Although the Greek word for "blessed" in 25:34 is not the same as the one employed in the beatitudes, both convey a blessing from God.

In the beatitudes, Jesus blesses those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake and who are reviled for their faith (5:10-11; cf. 24:9-14). Likewise, Jesus' teaching on the blessing of the sheep comes after he has warned his disciples that they will be hated by the world and tortured for his sake (24:9). In Christ's kingdom, the blessed ones are those who do not retaliate with violence, but bear witness to a new community by serving others (25:31-46).

The blessed ones have demonstrated their faithfulness by performing acts of loving-kindness. The charge to care for the poor and the disadvantaged can be found throughout scripture, but it is especially exhibited in the ministry of Jesus. In this Gospel, Christ has announced the arrival of God's kingdom while he cures the sick, welcomes the despised, and provides food for the hungry. He orders his disciples to carry on his ministry by doing likewise.

The most powerful summary for me of the parable of the sheep and goats was actually given by an evangelist from the 1970's called Keith Green. He used to perform this parable as a musically piece (I nearly played it for you but it is 7 minutes long!) His strap line at the end of the piece is that the difference between the sheep and the goats is the difference between what they did and didn't do!

It is a great question. What have we done? What have we failed to do?

As we consider who we are called to be maybe they are questions for us also. One of the key elements of this parable is not just in the doing but in the receiving. Not only when have we helped others, but when have we allowed others to help us?

I wonder too if the invitation to notice the reign or presence of the kingdom of God is also evident in this parable. I wonder how often this year we have cried out to God asking for an answer when God was in front of us all along. Similarly I wonder how often we screamed or swore in anger at God for something which has happened – which was not God at all rather our inability to see God before us.

There is no doubt that it is both difficult and easy to see God in this pandemic. The challenge is what we do with what we see!

I look at this year and I am very thankful. Thankful that we have supported each other in prayer in new and strange ways; thankful for the people who have learnt to smile with their eyes, and have been patient with change. I am thankful that I have learnt new skills; thankful for the way many injustices been named in a way that hopefully means we no longer will ignore them. I am even thankful that God challenges me each day, and that God is with us and surrounding us especially when we are at our most vulnerable. That like the Ephesians, God invite us to see the wonderful hope to which we are called.

Today we will end our celebration by joining in a hymn called Beauty for Brokenness. It sums up the intentions of Matthew and the letter of the Ephesians and indeed the hopes of this Feast Day. That we might dare to live out the vision of God's kingdom, that we pray with compassion, act in love and dare to hope in face of pain. **Amen.**