

This short act of worship has been produced for you by Revd Dan Haylett. If you are well enough and able, why not spend a few moments with God, perhaps at a time when you would normally be sharing with others in church - pray for them as they pray for you.

Opening Prayer

The words of Psalm 100 invite God's people to enter consciously into the awareness of God's presence. In worship, we pray that God will strengthen and inspire us with the knowledge and experience of steadfast love.

⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.

⁵ For the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures for ever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

God, whose steadfast love never ceases, may that love draw us closer to you and to one another as we share in the life of the kingdom. May we be reminded in our worship today of the signs of the kingdom around us and be encouraged to work and wait for the coming King. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Hymn: Christ triumphant, ever reigning

Singing the Faith 319

Sing/Read/Pray/Proclaim the words

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnsbOCH6S1Y>

Christ triumphant, ever reigning,
Saviour, Master, King!
Lord of heaven, our lives sustaining,
hear us as we sing:
Yours the glory and the crown,
the high renown, the eternal name.

Word incarnate, truth revealing,
Son of Man on earth!
Power and majesty concealing
by your humble birth:
Yours the glory and the crown,
the high renown, the eternal name!

Suffering servant, scorned, ill-treated,
victim crucified!
death is through the cross defeated,
sinners justified:
Yours the glory and the crown,
the high renown, the eternal name!

Priestly king, enthroned for ever
high in heaven above!
sin and death and hell shall never
stifle hymns of love:
Yours the glory and the crown,
the high renown, the eternal name!

So, our hearts and voices raising
through the ages long,
ceaselessly upon you gazing,
this shall be our song:
Yours the glory and the crown,
the high renown, the eternal name!

Michael Saward (b 1932)
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Let us pray together:
Loving God, we adore you. We bring our praise to you as we
acknowledge your reign in all creation.
We praise you for love that sustains and empowers, reaching
into every heart, preparing the world for the fullness of the
kingdom.
In Christ, you come to us, choosing our lives, our world as the
theatre of salvation and as the home of hope, joy and peace.
We praise you for the signs of your kingdom seen today.
Spirit of truth, you bind us in love and enable us to cooperate

in the demands of the kingdom. We praise your gentle power,
strengthening us for service, opening our hearts to receive.
You are the power that enables us to find our place in God's
kingdom.

God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we worship you and offer our
praise today. Pour into our hearts your renewing and
forgiving grace that does not let us be content with how we
are now. Forgive our failure to work in partnership with one
another and with you. Forgive our willingness to turn away
from you as we encounter you in one another.

In Christ we find our sins our forgiven, with an astonishing
grace that is beyond measure. May that grace cause our
hearts to sing this day, and may that forgiveness shape our
living from this day forward.

In the name of Christ. Amen.

Today's Gospel Reading: Matthew 25:31-46

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels
with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the
nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate
people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep
from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and
the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right
hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the
kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;
for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you

gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. ’

Time to Reflect

In the times we are living through it can seem as though the most effective way to get one’s own way or to cling to status

and power is to stir up division and separation. Whenever we feel like this, the Gospel passage makes rather uneasy reading for us.

The imagery in the passage seems stark, divisive and uncompromisingly unequivocal: Sheep and goats, well, it’s simple isn’t it? Sheep good, goat bad. You know where you stand with this and in an uncertain age you might even see the attraction of such a view. There can be something comfortable about the simplicity of a clear right or wrong; of being able to rely on the promise of “it will all be back to normal by Christmas” or to isolate yourself by only talking with people who agree with your worldview! More than a few world leaders and a fair few cults and sects have played on these very human temptations down the ages. More than a few times perhaps we ourselves have been tempted into a polarised view where we are right and others therefore must be wrong. As we tend to gravitate to the best seats in the text, we see ourselves as sheep, never the goats!

Yet of course when we dig a little deeper into what Matthew is telling us of Jesus’ teaching and ministry, we find (perhaps to our dismay) that it’s all a little more nuanced than that after all. The way of the kingdom is not that of the leader desperately clinging to power at all costs, nor is it like the simplistic and dehumanising division of the world into two camps – good and bad, or those like “us” and those different to

“us”. At the same time, Matthew is surely encouraging something more of a response than the classic quote that I saw once emblazoned on someone’s t-shirt, “Jesus is coming: look busy”!

There must be more to this passage than the well-worn question of whether Jesus here in the 1st C AD is prefiguring the justification debates of the Reformation period. Is it what we believe, our faith, that matters, or what we do about it that counts? It doesn’t seem to me that the question of how justification by faith and/or works is best understood particularly exercised Jesus and his disciples in quite the same way that it has bothered some of us down the ages.

So what are we to make of all this: sheep, goats, and a calling to account for our actions or inaction?

Perhaps the context helps. Up to now in Matthew’s gospel we have been reading a series of parables describing what preparedness and readiness for the Parousia (the return of the Son of Man) looks like in everyday living. We read this passage today on the Sunday before Advent, a time when we begin to focus on our own sense of readiness and being prepared by God for God. The Kingdom, seen in Jesus’ incarnation and serving, loving and living is here, Matthew is telling us, but at the same moment is still not yet complete. We have to find ways to cooperate with the king; to be those

who give the hungry food, the thirsty drink, the welcome to the stranger. It’s a clear call to action. From a famous advertising campaign (and another phrase you might have seen on clothing) we hear an echo of the challenge of Jesus: “Just do it”!

Matthew’s words here represent a particular type of writing. It’s not systematic theology that invites us to draw precise conclusions from each detail, but it is an inspired and majestic vision of a time when the returning Son of Man would judge the people according to what they had done. In facing the Son at his return, each person is asked to give an account of how they have lived within the economy of grace: how they have cared and acted, what attitudes have been cultivated, when the hard work of loving sacrificially has been taken up and when forgiveness has been offered. The word that is used in Greek for this kind of service is diakonos, from where we get the word diaconal, meaning an unselfish care and serving of others. This we are told is what will be the defining mark of someone who has truly lived by the kingdom’s rules and ethos.

For me, the most important part of this passage is the one that I think is most often overlooked. We often focus on sheep and goats. If we have read a commentary, we might even reflect that flocks of sheep and herds of goats were and are still practically indistinguishable to the untrained eye across the Middle East. We might use this passage to talk with Karl

Rahner about “anonymous Christians”, those who do not profess Christian faith, yet act and live in Christ-like ways. We might reflect on our experience of non-Christians offering love and service that is clearly Christ-like, while we lament our own poverty of response. We might conclude by saying that ultimately, we don’t get to decide on people’s eternal destiny, and if we are feeling particularly humble, we might even acknowledge that this is a good thing!

But what we miss is the element of surprise, or even astonishment in the story. Actually, both those considered “righteous” and those “accursed” share in this astonishment. The question is there, “Lord, when was it that we saw you...”, and it’s asked by both “sheep” and “goats”. What’s clear in the telling of the story is that Matthew imagines Jesus’ disciples serving one another, and possibly those around, without any awareness that this care was directed towards Jesus himself. It is not simply the sort of service that is offered as part of an official “mission opportunity” for the Church, it is clearly not just the service of any one group in the Christian community. In fact, perhaps surprisingly, it is open to anyone who offers self-less, self-emptying love and care to someone else. For in offering that without expectation, we honour God: Jesus incognito, in our midst.

In reading this visionary account of judgement, we are

reminded that the season of Advent lies ahead of us, offering us time to reflect on what really matters. Four weeks to be prepared and readied for the Coming One. Time to reflect on the kingdom here and now, valuing what we see and experience of God now. Time to allow ourselves to accept the insistent reality of hope in a time of flux and uncertainty and to find comfort that the life of kingdom does not rest on our own plans or decisions, and certainly not in division or embitterment. Time offered by God for us to offer all to God.

That question again from the passage stands out: “Lord, when was it that we saw you...”? Take time today to celebrate and give thanks for that which you’ve seen and perhaps been involved in or received from: how the hungry have been fed, how the thirsty have found water, how the stranger has been welcomed: and all of this sometimes done knowingly in Jesus’ name, and sometimes not. Sometimes the Kingdom is seen despite our best efforts as a Church.

For all this, we learn from Jesus, is the stuff of the kingdom: the currency that makes the economy flow and grow: faithful, unselfish giving, and the willingness to receive; and to do all this with the astonishment of recognising the reality of Jesus in our midst. The Coming King, whose reign is already here, calls us to follow and to respond. Just do it! Amen.

A time of prayer

Lord God, we offer our prayers today for your Church throughout the world, and for all who faithfully follow the pattern of love and service we see in Christ. We pray for the Church preparing to celebrate and keep Advent, and for those who struggle to keep a hopeful watch in these days.

We pray for the life of the world, giving thanks for care and support received and opportunities to give. We pray for all who are inspired to feed the hungry and to welcome those who feel that they do not belong. We offer the needs of the world and our local community to you and we pray for your grace to inspire our cooperation in your kingdom's purposes. Show us how to respond to the call of Christ, and remind us that each of us has a part to play.

We pray for those who are unwell at this time, and for those who find these days to be long and filled with fear. Draw near to them and to us, bringing comfort and strength.

We pray in thankfulness for all who have gone before us in loving and faithful kingdom service. We pray for all who mourn at this time, and for those whose sense of loss is overwhelming.

Lord God, in Christ you come to show us how to live well and how to serve. Empower us through your Spirit to fulfill that calling.

In the name of Christ we ask it. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name;
thy kingdom come; thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.

Hymn: Rejoice, the Lord is King

Singing the Faith 335

Sing/Read/Pray/Proclaim the words

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDFAv0eh-s8>

Rejoice, the Lord is King!
Your Lord and King adore!
mortals, give thanks and sing,
and triumph evermore.
Lift up your heart,
Lift up your voice;
Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

Jesus the Saviour reigns,
the God of truth and love;
when he had purged our stains,
he took his seat above:
Lift up your heart,
Lift up your voice;
Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

His kingdom cannot fail,
he rules both earth and heaven;
the keys of death and hell
are to our Jesus given:
Lift up your heart,
Lift up your voice;
Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

Rejoice in glorious hope!
Jesus the Judge shall come,
and take his servants up
to their eternal home:
We soon shall hear the archangel's voice;
God's trumpet-call shall sound: rejoice!

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

A prayer of blessing

God's kingdom is here and now: Go and serve in it.
God's kingdom is coming: faithfully prepare for it.
God's kingdom will come: rejoice in that glorious hope.

May the blessing of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with you today and always. Amen.