

## The Shepherd King

When the subject has come up, most people in recent times have been quite happy with King Charles. He's done nothing wrong and he looks suitably dignified. He's a good king, people say.

But the standard for being a 'good king' is not a terribly high one. Good kings, it seems, are few and far between. While the current king was still Prince of Wales, there was speculation about what regnal name he would choose – and I believe the frontrunner was him becoming George VII. This was because neither of the preceding King Charles had a particularly good reputation – Charles I had brought about the English Civil War, and his son Charles II didn't start any wars, he was known for his fairly loose moral standards, and he had at least 12 illegitimate children.

While there are a few 'good kings' dotted throughout history, it seems bad ones are more common. Perhaps it's as Lord Acton said: "power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely".

Perhaps the most famous good king, is the one we'll probably hear sung about next month – and that's Good King Wenceslas. Except that Wenceslaus not really a king – he was the Duke of Bohemia. But he was by all accounts, good. And he was assassinated by his brother, Boleslaus the Cruel.

The biblical kings we read about in the Old Testament were similarly mostly not good. Solomon turned to worshipping other gods (1 Kings 11), Jeroboam turned the nation of Israel away from God leading to their exile in Assyria (2 Kings 17) and so on.

The kings of the southern kingdom of Judah did a bit better – often they were personally devoted to God, but they failed in their duties as kings.

The model king, of course, was David. The second king of Israel, second only to Moses as a leader of the ancient people of God. But David was flawed too – we think of him mostly as the slayer of Goliath, but we also know him as founder of the house of David – the ancestor of Jesus.

He started as a shepherd and a hunter, became a champion and a warrior, then a general, an outlaw and a king. But he was also a poet, a musician, dancer, a prophet, a worship leader, a brother, husband, son and parent. He was also a great sinner: He was an adulterer and a murderer.

So in David, we see a shepherd who became a king.

But as we look forward from David, we see the king who was also a shepherd.

Our Old Testament reading today comes from the book of Ezekiel – and Ezekiel was a prophet around 400 years after David, and around 600 years before Jesus.

Ezekiel begins this passage by telling us that God says "I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness." (34:11b-12) God is looking for his lost sheep, just as Jesus tells us later in Matthew 18:12 "If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?"

God, through Ezekiel, tells us who these sheep are: It is a far wider group than the nation of Israel that Ezekiel knew, because God says "I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land." (34:13).

This reaches far beyond the physical restoration of the land to the nation that the people of Ezekiel's time would have looked forward to – instead, it's an inheritance for all God's people. The inheritance promised to Abraham – father Abraham – back in Genesis chapter 12 “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” (Genesis 12:3)

God's promises were always to all people – through Abraham, through Israel, and ultimately, through Jesus.

God's blessings aren't just to bring them to a certain place or a certain point, they are ongoing. He says “I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.” Remember those words of David from Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.” Remember, David wrote that 400 odd years before Ezekiel.

And that leads us nicely into the next verse from Ezekiel “I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord.” And that puts me in mind of Jesus saying “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Matt 11:28).

God is not just calling those who are in need to rest - instead he's calling those in any kind of need. He's calling – seeking – all of us. God says “I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak...” (34:16a).

He will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. Do you remember when John the Baptist sent his own disciples to Jesus to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’ To which Jesus replied, ‘Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.’ (Matthew 11:3-5).

As well as that good news, in what Ezekiel prophesies here, there's also an element of judgement: I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice. (34:16b)

We might have to wonder for a moment what he means by ‘sleek and strong’ – but when we get to verse 20, it's clarified when Ezekiel tells us “Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says to them: See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. (34:20-22)

God, as he shepherds his flock, will judge between the fat (or the sleek and the strong) on one hand, and the lean on the other. The references to fat and sleek and strong aren't about our physical characteristics, but about our moral or ethical standing. Have we got fat and sleek and strong at the expense of others? Certainly, we can look to the pharisees and teachers of the law of Jesus' time as people who had become strong at the expense of others – as Jesus said “They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.” (Matt 23:4).

Ezekiel tells us that the weak sheep had been driven away by the strong – the religious leaders who were supposed to be shepherding the people had failed. In chapter 9 of Matthew's gospel we read that Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had

compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd". (Matthew 9:35-36)

But God is determined to save his people. And we get to this wonderful prophesy in verse 23 "I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd."

Remember, this is 400 years after David, so he's clearly not talking about King David, but one of David's line. A shoot from the stump of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1). A shepherd. A good shepherd. The good shepherd. The one who we know is Jesus.

Jesus tells us in John chapter 10, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep," and "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me" (John 10:11,14)

David sang "The Lord is my shepherd", and God promises to shepherd his people, and he does so through his servant David – the one of the house and line of David. The messiah. The Christ. The one who was anointed to be king.

The reading concludes with God telling us through Ezekiel "I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken." (34:23).

This passage speaks to us of our ultimate accountability before Jesus – are we fat and sleek and powerful or are we lean? And that's explored in today's gospel reading.

Jesus refers to Himself as "the Son of man" (Matthew 25:31). And that means 'human being' – but the term 'Son of Man' also reflects the Old Testament vision of the enthronement of the 'Son of man' by the 'Ancient of days' (Daniel 7:13-14) – a reference to the Messiah.

Jesus says "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left." (Matthew 25:31-33)

He will come in glory, and be seated on the throne – and yet he will still act as a shepherd.

It's not until the next verse that Jesus identifies himself as the King – and indeed as the Son of God.

First century Judean shepherds are often thought to have been outsiders, scruffy and smelly, and tending their flocks by night and so on. I'm not sure that's an entirely correct picture – because they certainly had an important job, and sheep were valuable commodities – but they were certainly not regal. They were not kingly. If we had a picture of a shepherd sitting on a throne, we'd think that something wasn't right.

And yet Jesus identifies himself as a shepherd and as a king. Not a shepherd, who, like David, later became a king, but a shepherd king.

Jesus as the shepherd king talks about separating the sheep and goats. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between sheep and goats, particularly some of the hardier varieties of sheep, but those who run their flocks together know the difference, and they can separate the one from the other when they need. The shepherd king puts the sheep on his right, and the goats on his left. (Matthew 25:33).

What makes the difference between the metaphorical sheep and goats that Jesus talks about? Well, it's how we treat the least of his brothers and sisters. Have we fed the hungry, given water to the thirsty, offered hospitality to strangers, clothed the naked, nursed the sick and visited the prisoners?

This is not to say that doing those things earns our inclusion as sheep on the right - instead, it's to show us that if we are truly the sheep of the Shepherd King then we will be feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty and so on. The apostle Paul makes it clear to us that "it is by grace you have been saved, through faith...it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast." But he also tells us those who put their trust in Jesus are "created in Christ Jesus to do good works," (Ephesians 2:8-10).

We are indeed saved by grace. Jesus came to be our Shepherd King, not because we deserved him, but precisely because we didn't, nor could we ever deserve him. And yet he came. Born, as we will remember over the next month in humble circumstances in Bethlehem, praised by angels, attended by wise men and also by shepherds from the hills. Born of the line of David.

And he lived a human life. And he taught and healed and cast out demons. And he was ultimately betrayed and deserted, and crucified and buried.

But on the third day, he rose from the grave, and opened the way for us to become part of his everlasting kingdom.

And so, Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of Man, the Son of God, the prince of peace will be forever our Shepherd King.

Amen