**The Sunday next before Advent – Christ the King**

**Our reading is Matthew 25: 31-46**

Today is the last Sunday of the church’s year. Next Sunday is Advent, a new beginning. And today is known also as Christ the King, this is the Kingdom Season.

We have the wonderful parable of the sheep and goats. Earlier this year, when our churches were closed on Easter Sunday, Fiona and I went for a walk and found a field full of sheep with lambs. The sun was shining and the lambs were doing what lambs do best, which is to wander off and get into mischief. Sometimes a lamb went too far and lost sight of its mother, then the field would be filled with lambs bleating and mothers calling. It was the best Easter Evensong I’ve ever heard.

Sometimes it takes a time of loss for us to discover new gifts, things that are there but we just haven’t noticed before.

A colleague produced some photographs of sheep and goats. You’d think it would be easy to tell them apart, modern breeds are usually quite distinctive, though there are some sheep that look very much like goats, and some goats that look very much like sheep. In Jesus’ day it took an experienced eye to sort them quickly.

The parable of course is not about sheep and goats, it is about people. More specifically how people treat other people. God it seems is not terribly interested in how clever you are, or what kind of car your drive, or how much you earn, or what you house cost you. God is more interested in how you treat other people.

This is the feast of Christ the King, the last Sunday of the Kingdom Season. The Kingdom of God is neither a time nor a place. It is an activity. The Kingdom of God happens when people live in accordance with God’s will. When human lives reflect obedience to divine love the Kingdom comes close. And this happens in the smallest of things.

Those whom the King welcomes are those who give food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, a welcome to the stranger, clothing to the naked, those who visit the sick and the person in prison. No-one will erect a statue to you for doing these things, you probably won’t get an OBE or even a Blue Peter badge. But these are the tasks which bring the Kingdom close.

There is not a huge amount of good news around at the moment. People are weary, and people are confused. We approach Advent without being able to light the Advent candle. We don’t know if we can be with family and friends at Christmas. We are learning not to make plans.

Perhaps there is a reminder that God is rarely if ever in our plans. God is always in the unexpected and the unpredictable. God is in the person we least expect. God is in the unexpected kindness of strangers.

Perhaps the Kingdom comes close but we have not seen it. Because it wasn’t as we planned it, or as we expected it. Maybe this year we learn anew, to find the Kingdom amongst us, in so much that we took for granted and did not value enough.

On the theme of sheep and goats, in January Bishop Mark is coming to visit us for our Plough Sunday service on 17th January. I am sure we will still be under some form of restrictions and it would be a great sadness to turn people away from church. So I am immensely grateful that Jonathan Palmer of MotorSport Vision and the team at Oulton Park have offered us hospitality at the Fogarty Moss Centre. Of course we shall need to confirm everything nearer the time to see what rules might be in place by then, but all being well we shall be able to gather in a greater number to welcome Bishop Mark to our Benefice.

We usually have animals in our Plough Sunday service but that’s not going to be possible this time round. So I think it’s time for something slightly less serious. I don’t know if you’ve heard of the Belper Moo, if not look it up on the internet, but I think they’ve got the right idea. For Plough Sunday we’ll invite those daft enough to wear animal hats, either bought or homemade – and as you can see, I’ve made a start.

God the Father,

help us to hear the call of Christ the King

and to follow in his service,

whose kingdom has no end;

for he reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,

one God, one glory.