***Anointed King:* Matthew 25: 31-46 & Ephesians 1: 15-23**

**Sermon for the Festival of Christ the King, Sunday 26/11/2023 (Rev Phil Wootton)**

Back on the 6th May, all eyes were fixed on Westminster Abbey for the coronation of King Charles III. From a religious perspective, the key moment was not so much the laying of the crown upon the new king’s head, but his anointing with holy oil. The oil’s significance was emphasised through the fact it had been consecrated in Jerusalem by the Orthodox Patriarch and the Anglican Archbishop. The antiquity of the ceremony was expressed through the use of a silver-gilt spoon, dating back to the 12th century. Anointing was more than pageantry: it was a symbol of kingship recognised since ancient times.

We know Christ himself as the true anointed King. It goes with the name: ‘Christ’ is the Greek translation of the Hebrew ‘Messiah,’ which means ‘anointed one.’ In the Old Testament, priests, prophets and kings were all anointed for their office – a sign of their vocation and dedication in God’s service. But there was a growing sense that what was needed, what God promised, was a single anointed one – a Messiah, God’s servant, who would turn the world around. The New Testament presents Jesus as that Messiah, anointed by the Holy Spirit at his baptism to bring in the kingdom of God.

On this Christ the King day – the final Sunday of the church’s calendar year – we celebrate the culmination of his work as anointed King. The year began last December, with the hidden signs of kingship around his birth in the royal town of Bethlehem. We have heard afresh about the signs and wonders he performed in his ministry, demonstrating his authority over sin, sickness, evil and death. Then, through the events of his arrest, trial and execution, his enemies couldn’t help themselves from affirming his kingship if only in mockery (purple robe and crown of thorns, for example). Finally, we have rejoiced in his great vindication – his victory over death, his exaltation on high, his heavenly reign and the promise of his return. A verse from Ephesians we heard today gives a vision of the cosmic Christ: ‘God has put all things under his feet and has made him head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all’ – that’s Christ in glory, God’s anointed King.

Today’s parable from Matthew 25 begins with the awesome vision of the Son of Man upon his throne in all his dazzling glory, with legions of angels attending him – and yet, very rapidly, this king appears to dethrone himself. Yes, he does come in majesty, but, he seems to be saying, that’s not really how I see myself, and you would do well to be looking in a different direction. First, he compares himself with a humble shepherd, whose job is to separate sheep from goats. Now, that sounds simple enough to us – fluffy, woolly sheep, nicely grazing their pastures, separated from voracious goats who’ll eat your washing off the line. In the Middle East, sheep and goats look remarkably similar, hard to tell apart. (I’m told you have to look at the tails – sheep’s tails flop down while goats’ tails stick up.) The Good Shepherd sees what’s hidden from human eyes, and discerns our true record which no amount of boasting, or self-deprecation, can affect. He sees us as we don’t. Prepare to be surprised!

Then the King, in a sense, comes further down from the throne. ‘When I was hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or sick, or naked or a stranger or in prison… When *I* was …’ Jesus on earth personally experienced the problems of the human condition, but in glory he knows human experience through and through. ‘When you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it for me.’ They hadn’t noticed – those ‘sheep’ on the right-hand side – hadn’t noticed they’d served the King, because he didn’t look like a king. They probably had hardly noticed they’d helped anyone: they’d just got on and done it. And the ‘goats’ on the left – those who hadn’t helped – probably hadn’t even noticed there was someone in need: all they could see was their own priorities. But if you’re willing to look, the face of King Jesus can be seen in each person, and the need of each person is his need.

In the spirit of noticing what may go unnoticed, I want to highlight something that you may be only vaguely aware of. When you give to the church, whether through the collection plate, or by standing order, or by on-line giving or however you do so, some of that money is paid on to other organisations who give practical help to those in difficult situations. This week, the PCC has finalised which ones we support this year.

So, at Good Shepherd through St Chad and St Mark Weekly Market we help provide affordable food to strangers in this land. Through Compton Care, we care for those coming to the end of their lives. Through Wolverhampton Street Pastors, we show compassion for those washed up by the night-time economy; and through A Rocha, we work to alleviate climate change which is damaging to so many.

At Christ Church through The Well, we help feed the hungry in Wolverhampton; through The Haven, we help provide a place of shelter for women who have nowhere to go; through Christians against Poverty, we help those who get trapped in debt; and through the Children’s Air Ambulance, we help provide emergency support for children.

I am saying this not to encourage complacency, or to say, ‘Aren’t we doing well!’ Bible passages like today’s explain why the PCC, as the decision-making body, considers it vital that the church should be looking beyond itself: charitable giving is one way we do so. This is not to take the place of the personal response to someone we see in need – the call to the person who’s unwell, the coffee bought for someone who’s shivering, the chat with someone who’s on their own. In today’s complex world, we can’t do everything personally, but we must still seek the face of Jesus in those in need.

Let’s remind ourselves again of that verse from Ephesians: ‘God has put all things under his feet and has made him head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.’ The fullness of Christ is seen in the vastness of the needs of the world, so many in poverty, so many far from home. The fullness of Christ is to be seen in his body the church, stretching out across the world. The fullness of Christ is to be seen in a myriad of acts of care and kindness across the planet. All who do so bear the anointing of the King they serve.