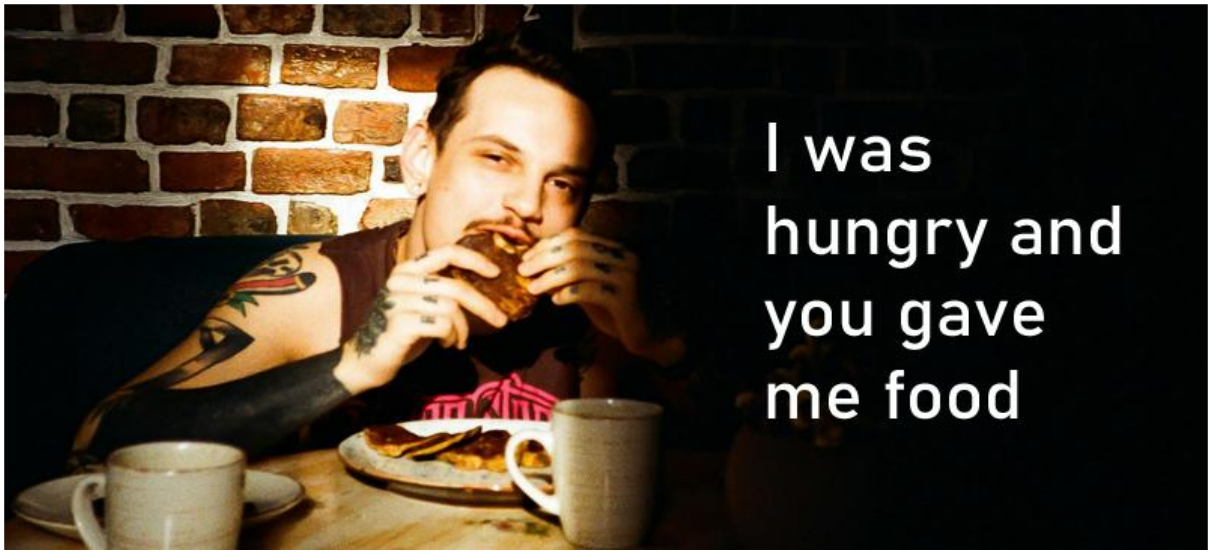

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Scripture notes – Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe – Year A – 22nd November 2026

The is the last Sunday of the liturgical year and as a conclusion, the readings ask us to consider what it means to call Jesus our 'King'. He is not a figurehead like most modern monarchs, nor one who imposes his position by force, not someone seeking personal glory. Instead we have the image of a shepherd-king, one dedicated to caring, nurturing, and establishing justice and mercy for the 'sheep'.

Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17
Shepherds and sheep, both real and symbolic, are mentioned throughout the Bible, from the book of Genesis, where the 'Patriarchs' (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) were pastoralists, moving through the countryside with their flocks. It was a way of life that did not entirely disappear with settlement and more complex civilization. The 'ideal king' of Israel was David, who began life tending flocks. From all this, shepherds became a metaphor for kingship.

Ezekiel, like other prophets, denounced leaders who failed to live up to the demands of caring for their flocks. The Lord, says this prophet, rejects the failed shepherds who scattered the flocks, and takes on himself the role of shepherding. He uses passionate images of love and concern for people in trouble. The last verse included is a reminder

foreshadowing the Gospel: the sheep who reject the shepherd's care will be judged, as were the shepherds.

Although most of us do not live among sheep flocks and shepherds, it is still an image we can appreciate– Pope Francis spoke of seeking bishops who 'have the smell of the sheep' on them. They are to know their people well and understand their needs as did Jesus who called himself 'the model shepherd' in the Gospel of John.

The importance of sheep in this week's readings will continue, and will only fully be appreciated when we reach the Gospel!

Psalm 22*/23*
Long a favourite among Christians, the psalm picks up Lord's shepherding and combines it with another prophetic theme, the banquet prepared for those who in God's care. That may be seen foreshadowing the promised reward in the Gospel.

1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28
Some in the church at Corinth doubted the resurrection of the body, and St Paul is concerned to set them straight on that important part of our faith, stressing that it comes from belief in Christ's own resurrection. He then looks ahead to what life will be like for us after death, when we are taken into Christ's kingdom and brought to the Father in heaven.
The idea that all suffering comes from Adam's turning away from God came into Judaism at the time of the author of the book of Wisdom. Paul makes use of this idea, in particular, that one person can somehow open the gates to death or to life for all people. For him, and centuries of Christians after, it becomes a way to explain how Jesus' death can somehow 'save' us. So here in this well-known passage Paul introduces a parallel between Adam, whose sin brings death to all humanity, and Jesus, whose resurrection brings life to all.

Paul uses military imagery, but makes clear that Christ is not like a worldly conqueror – the enemies he subdues are sin and death, paradoxically accomplished by his own death, and the triumph of the resurrection. His Kingship is not an earthly, military one, as some imagined the Jewish Messiah to be.

Matthew 25:31-46

This reading is found only in Matthew and has been a favourite of artists given to imagining the 'devil and his angels' with frightening details. These readings on the End Times have too often been used to encourage fear of a punishing God. Their true emphasis is on God's mercy and a call to accept God's love offered to the very end of our lives.

Jesus would be speaking to people who were very familiar with this kind of imagery and the style of discourse. The imagery of the Son of Man coming in glory is in the book of Daniel, 7:9-14, written in the style of literature called 'apocalyptic' depicting visions or dreams. Daniel describes a vision opening in heaven with images inspiring awe and worship. After that, the prophet says: 'I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, so that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.'

Jesus' first sentence, then, echoes this picture and suggests to his listeners (or Matthew's readers) that this is a picture of authority and dominion being set up.

What happens next, though, can be seen as a striking reversal of expectation that probably took Jesus' listeners by surprise. For this person with authority and dominion does not lord it over the human beings, (or 'sheep and goats'!) before him. Instead, the core of his message is that he has chosen to identify himself with the 'smallest', most insignificant, most marginalised of humanity.

Thus, in Jesus' mouth, this teaching – which Matthew portrays as his very last public teaching, before his Passion – dramatically overturns expectations of the rule of a kinglike, political earthly Messiah. It also rejects the idea that the desire of God and the 'Son of Man' is to be worshipped, and that adoration and worship are the keys to heaven.

For, strikingly, the 'sheep' who cared for those in desperate need, outcasts, deprived had no idea that in doing so they were serving Jesus. They are as ignorant of this as the goats, and have to ask when it was that they did these things for Jesus!

With a final backward look at these chapters in Matthew, that we have heard in the Gospels over the month, perhaps we can also recollect Jesus' condemnation of false religious attitudes and arrogant leadership. This is his final message as to what constitutes our best understanding of what God calls for – service, and indeed understanding the presence of Christ above all in the 'smallest' and most overlooked, rejected or vulnerable.

Meanwhile, in the context of the Church's choice of this Gospel as a celebration of 'Christ the King', the Church is delivering the message that to truly understand Jesus' 'kingship', we need to accept that the core of his identity – his incarnation as human and his kingship – is to be found in identification with the least, the most vulnerable, the most neglected of humanity.

Joan Griffith/Gwen Griffith-Dickson

Suggestions for Prayer or Reflection

- How do you understand Jesus' kingship? There are many images in Scripture, but also in favourite hymns. Is he 'King of Glory'? 'King of Peace'? 'King of my Heart'? Or do you find the image unhelpful for you, and prefer other imagery?
- Jesus goes beyond telling us to be good to those in need. He actively says that he IS those who are in need. When we seek to help others, do we go that far? Actually see Christ as present within them?
- Which of these commissions in Matthew 25:35 do you feel most called to – poverty of those who do not have enough food or clothing? Shelter? Welcoming the 'stranger', perhaps the refugee, migrant, those who are trafficked, and giving them support and 'hospitality'? The sick in mind or body? The prisoner or politically persecuted? Or something else?

Gwen Griffith-Dickson