

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST KING OF THE UNIVERSE (YEAR A)

First Reading Ezekiel 34: 11–12, 15–17

Ezekiel, a great prophet and priest, spoke this message during conflict between the Israelites and the Babylonians, who had already taken about 8,000 Israelites into exile. He brings a message of hope that God will look after them and restore them to their life in their homeland.

Ezekiel believes that the leaders of his people are irresponsible and unwise (Ezekiel 34: 1–10). He encourages the people by telling them that God himself will be their leader: a responsible shepherd-leader who will search and care for all of them, whether wounded, weak, healthy, stray, or in exile. God will bring them all to rest.



The image of the shepherd is often used in ancient Near Eastern literature as a metaphor for a King, hence the choice of this reading on the feast of Christ the King. Ezekiel builds on motives familiar to the people, particularly through Psalm 22 (23), 'The Lord is my Shepherd'.

St John, in turn, will pick up this image in his Gospel: 'I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd is the one who lays down his life for his sheep' (John 10: 11). He is not one who 'rules them cruelly and violently' (Ezekiel 34: 4).

The Lord's Kingship is above all concerned with love and justice. He will judge people according to these values. Matthew uses a similar phrase in today's Gospel: 'He will separate people one from another as the shepherd separates sheep from goats'.

Historical background to the Feast



The Feast of Jesus Christ our Universal King has been celebrated on this last Sunday of the liturgical year for almost a century. It points to Christ's Kingship and to the End of Time, when the kingdom of Jesus will be established in all its fullness to the ends of the earth. It leads directly into Advent, when we anticipate Christ's second coming. The devotion to Christ's Kingship is referenced in the encyclical *Quas Primas* of Pope Pius XI (1925), which quotes Cyril of Alexandria: 'Christ has dominion over all creatures, a dominion not seized by violence nor usurped, but by essence and by nature'. It was a reminder to Christians at that time (when the fascist Mussolini was Italian Prime Minister) that their allegiance was to their spiritual ruler in heaven rather than to any earthly leader.

Gospel Matthew 25: 31–46

The Son of Man

We are advised not to take Matthew's account of the Final Judgement too literally. He paints a kingly portrait of Jesus first by having Jesus refer to himself as 'the Son of Man' (v. 31): a title used in different ways throughout the scriptures. Here it is used triumphantly, as in Daniel 7: 13–14, where 'one like a son of man' is given dominion, glory and kingship.

The sheep and the goats

The Jesus of Matthew's Gospel uses the familiar imagery of the shepherd, continuing the theme of today's First Reading. Jesus vividly describes how the king will divide the nations into two types of people: the 'blessed' and the 'cursed', also referred to as sheep and goats.

The king's standard of judgement.

Jesus clearly details what the king requires of his people if they are to become citizens of his kingdom. However, it is notable that none of the attributes required is religious in nature, nor is there any mention of commandments or laws being kept or broken. Both the 'sheep' and the 'goats' are surprised by the criteria Jesus presents to them. Both groups have failed to recognise that what they have done for others has actually been done for God, their Lord and King. The love withheld from others they have in fact withheld from God.

The focus is therefore on our attitude. The 'blessed' are those who are loving to others without any thought of self. In contrast, those addressed as 'cursed' are effectively saying that – had they known the one in need of help was God, rather than some insignificant person – they would have acted differently.

It is not that the 'cursed' are condemned for doing something morally wrong; it is simply that they have done nothing at all.