

## **Sundays between 20 and 26 November, Sunday before Advent Year A**

As we approach the season of Advent, the dual-track sequence of Old Testament lessons reverts to single track.

### **OT Continuous**

#### **Ezek 34: 11-16, 20-24**

Ezekiel was a typical Old Testament Prophet, feisty, angry, deeply committed and utterly fearless. Here in chapter 34 he draws on the image of the shepherd guiding and guarding the sheep to make his point, that the leaders of Israel have become complacent and self-regarding. Not only are they *negligent* of the "sheep" (the people) in their charge, they are also *exploitative*. In verses 11-16 he promises that under God's shepherding their experience will be different. Jesus uses this image of the shepherd as faithful guardian in John 10 and in the well-known parable of the lost sheep.

Verses 20-24 reflect God's judgement on the defaulting shepherds, ending with a specific promise of perfect shepherding under (a descendant of) King David. (Don't forget that Ezekiel lived several hundred years after David, we're talking here about a Davidic dynasty rather than David himself).

#### **Ps 95: 1-7a**

The Vulgate (Latin) translation of this psalm begins with the word "Venite", meaning come". The church has used this psalm under the heading "The Venite" throughout its life. It is the first canticle in Morning Prayer in the Book of Common Prayer.

The extract selected for today is a call to worship that covers the range from praise through to adoration. Ancient – but still never bettered.

#### **Or Ps 100**

Psalm 100 – the alternative psalm for this day – stands close to Psalm 95 both in the psalter sequence and in its mood. Where it differs is that whereas Psalm 95 goes on to warn the people about lapses into doubt, this psalm concentrates exclusively on the positive.

#### **Epistle Eph 1: 15-23**

Paul is often a very subtle correspondent. He begins by setting out the foundations of his argument in such a way that it is very difficult to see things any other way. Then, later on, he builds on this foundation in the way he comments on the things he has heard about the folk he is writing to – things that have caused him concern. In this instance, look at the beginning of chapter 4. Why might he feel it necessary to urge his readers to "lead a life worthy of your calling" if that were not a matter of doubt and anxiety for him? Why, later in chapter 4, does he call upon them more specifically to stop quarrelling, stop chasing fashion in their beliefs and practices, and in chapter

5, to avoid even mentioning fornication and impurity – unless he has seen (or on good authority heard of) these problems in the little “circuit” of churches around Ephesus.

But back to that foundation. Paul’s idea of a Christian foundation is clear: after complimenting the Ephesian communities on their love for all the brothers, he focuses on divine wisdom known through Christ (v17), on hope (v18), and the greatness of God’s power for us who believe (v19). He ends with a mighty acclamation of the exalted status of Christ in the purpose of God.

What is particularly interesting is the position he accords to the church (v22) in the grand scheme of things. It suggests that all things are put under Christ’s feet for the benefit of the church “which is his body”. So, Paul’s metaphor of the body is carried much further than simply the way the church is constituted as the body of Christ; it embraces the idea that the church is, in some sense, the whole object of the exercise.

### **Gospel Matt 25: 31-46**

Sheep and goats! Easy enough to tell apart, we might suppose, but the criterion is not about the distinguishing features of animal species. Rather, it is about conduct and behaviour, especially towards other people.

Game theory is an interesting topic in Mathematics. Given the possibilities available to your opponent, which among the moves open to you is the one that minimises the risk of total loss – or maximises the probability of victory (these aren’t necessarily the same). It has been applied to business and commerce, and to military strategy. One of its key concepts is the idea of information: how much do we know and how much do we not know (many of us will remember some rather enigmatic words about “known unknowns” and “unknown unknowns”, spoken by the former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Game theory draws a distinction between games of complete information (in which participants know everything – nothing is concealed) and games of incomplete information.

This story is evidently about a game of incomplete information. It’s called “life”. In the way we deal with other people we simply have no way of knowing about the consequences of our choice to help (where we can) or to turn aside and do nothing. Jesus’ point is surely that in the absence of complete information there is a view that we must take: the needy person before us is an embodiment of Jesus himself.

Now that’s really tough!