

## "Christ Our Shepherd-King" Ezekiel 34:11-24 Misericordia Domini

What happens when leaders—both secular and sacred—become abusive tyrants? What happens when CEOs of large corporations lie to their workers about the state of their pension plans and betray the public trust? What happens when televangelists, manipulate their audience, and use the money given to them by the public for such trivial items as air-conditioned doghouses, rather than caring for the poor and needy? What happens when political leaders become self-serving tyrants, using all kinds of underhanded, back-stabbing tactics to abuse their people and rule them with terror?

Today we celebrate Misericordia Domini, the mercy of the Lord. We celebrate the fact that, as our Introit for today says, The earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord. God the Father promises to send us a shepherd to protect us.

In our passage from Ezekiel today, we have both law and gospel; both condemnation and compassion; both judgement and grace. The prophet Ezekiel, likely speaks this oracle around the time when his people were returning back to the Promised Land, after their Babylonian exile. In the oracle, Ezekiel states that God will weed out the abusive leaders—likely referring both to the Israelite leaders and foreign leaders. God will confront and judge these

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abusive leaders based on what they have done. According to Ezekiel, they were self-serving and ruthless. They had failed to care for the poor, the weak, and the sick.

In contrast to these abusive leaders, Ezekiel preaches a message of gospel, compassion and grace to his people. The language Ezekiel employs is most gentle and comforting. When we read it and hear it, we're most likely reminded of the twenty-third Psalm and Jesus's words in the Gospel of John. The words provide us with a beautiful picture in our mind's eye—namely, that of Christ as the Good Shepherd, Christ our Shepherd-King.

When I read and hear these words from Ezekiel, I'm reminded of two inspiring pictures. A good friend of mine who recently travelled to the Holy Land showed the first picture to me. He had taken a picture of a shepherd and his sheep. It is an interesting picture, because contrary to what many people might think, the shepherd is not leading his sheep by chasing them from behind. No, rather, he is leading them by going ahead of the flock and they follow him. This picture certainly reveals the great truth of Jesus' words in the Fourth Gospel where he reminds us that the shepherd knows and loves the sheep and the sheep know and love the shepherd—therefore they trust and follow their shepherd wherever the

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The second picture that comes to mind when I read and hear Ezekiel's prophecy is that famous one depicting Jesus the Good Shepherd tenderly holding a lamb. This picture reminds me of how Ezekiel describes what God our Shepherd-King will do to show his love for his people—Ezekiel, quoting the LORD says: "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak." This must have been a very hopeful, joyful, comforting message for those Israelites who first heard it as they returned from exile to their homeland.

Today people—including us!—need to hear this message too, because it speaks to so many people in the world today. In a world where two-thirds of the population live in abject poverty; where they lack most, if not all of the basics of life; such a message can give them hope for a better future. Whether it's the lost youth on the streets, the ones who have been led astray by such false religions and gods of wealth and fame, the ones who are suffering from injuries due to abusive relationships, the ones who are weakened by illness and disease—Christ our Shepherd-King is seeking and

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longing to save them all. The incredible thing is that he's working through us, his people, to be his hands and feet; to share his love and saving, healing presence with everyone—especially those in greatest need like the street children in our cities, the Pakistan earthquake victims, the Christians of Sudan in Darfur who are being killed and oppressed by government-supported militias, and many more in all corners of our troubled world.

In the closing verses of our passage today, the prophet Ezekiel proclaims an oracle that looks ahead into the future when God's Messiah will come and reign as the Good Shepherd-King. He states: "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David." As Christians reading this passage, we believe that it refers to Christ, and again we think of the words of Jesus in John 10:16, where he says, speaking of "other sheep," that is, people from every nation gathered by Jesus, who listen to his voice: "So there will be one flock, one shepherd." The mention of this "one shepherd," in both Ezekiel and John points to a time of unity, reconciliation and peace among all the peoples of the world. Originally, Ezekiel's audience likely thought and believed that this referred to their immediate or near future situation—wherein God would unite all of the divided and scattered Israelites from all corners of the then known world to

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bring them together, to be reconciled with each other and live in peace.

For us Christians today, we likely are more inclined to think and believe that this reference to “one shepherd” describes Christ our Good Shepherd-King—whom one day we believe will gather Jews and Gentiles from every corner of the earth together and bring history to its final conclusion. He, as the Ruling Messiah will usher in the age to come, an age of eternal peace, where all evil and hatred, suffering and abuse shall end. An age that we all long for today and hope to inherit in the future, thanks to God’s all-encompassing love and grace. So take comfort in God our Good Shepherd-King who remains forever the righteous Ruler over us all. Amen.