

## The Reign of Christ

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Matthew 25:31-46

You may know of the English comedian, David Mitchell, a character I first encountered on QI. His latest offering, which was a project during lockdowns, was a book that I am now enjoying: *Unruly*, which is a history of the kings and queens of England from Arthur to Elizabeth I. I have just reached the Norman Invasion.

The Anglo-Saxon kings, and indeed many of those who came latter, were essentially what we would today call warlords. They won their status in battle, only later seeking to legitimise their position by having a coronation that sought to replicate what they heard about in the Bible. Many were vicious; violence was second nature, and they were ruthless. Harold Hare-foot blinded his half-brother to stop him claiming the throne, which was somewhat better than other kings, who would have simply had the rival killed.

The kings of Jesus' day were no better. While there is little evidence for Herod's slaughter of the innocents, it was a plausible story. A pun of the day said that it was safer to be Herod's pigs than his sons. On a larger scale, although for a long time Rome claimed to be a republic and the emperor was the "first among equals" this was only a convenient fiction. What was known in the world of Jesus were kings who were brutal, and we would expect the imagery of the Bible to be in line with this experience.

Instead we see that a common metaphor for a King throughout the Ancient Near East is that of the Shepherd. Of course, a shepherd does sometimes need to use violence to protect his sheep from wild animals or thieves, but their main job is care for the sheep. Shepherds would find the good pastures, clean water, care for the sick, and heal the wounded. Although in Jewish thought shepherds were a common metaphor for kings, they were also seen as being outcasts to society, much like Gypsies or Travellers are in European culture. There is a tension between the idealised imagery around shepherds and the way the village people treated them.

Throughout the Gospels we see Jesus acting against cultural expectations, so it is natural that on this Sunday reflecting on the reign of Christ we read stories not of kings, but of the Good Shepherd. Where the kings of Israel and Judah had often failed to be a good shepherd, Christ is the shepherd who truly cares for his sheep. It is important to note this image of Christ the shepherd was also one of the earliest images in Christian history.

I wonder what a contemporary equivalent would be to the shepherd in our culture. [Pause] What might this image teach us about who Christ is and what it means to follow him today?