

# North Kildonan United Church

22<sup>nd</sup> November 2020 ~ Rev. Don Johnson

## “Christ the King”

*Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24*

*Ephesians 1: 15-23*

*Matthew 25: 31-46*

*Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.*

Salisbury Cathedral is one of the great ecclesiastical treasures of England. Set in the city of Salisbury, the cathedral is noted for possessing the tallest steeple in the country. During the Second World War, the German Air Force used the steeple as a guidepost on their bombing raids. Because of the great navigational help this steeple provided those pilots, the city of Salisbury was never bombed. The British capitalized on that suspected fact by establishing aircraft factories throughout Salisbury. By the end of the war, 2,000 to 2,500 Spitfires, 10% of the total national production during those years, were built in factories, halls and other locations in Salisbury, all safe from disruption from bombing raids.

Amongst its other claims to fame is a clock they have. It is believed to be the oldest mechanical clock still working, and it dates back to 1386. It's a curious device, not what we would expect a clock to look like. I remember thinking that during my first visit to Salisbury in 1995.

Made of wrought iron, the sole purpose of the clock is to strike a bell once an hour, so the clergy and people know when church is starting. The Cathedral describes the clock this way: *As is usual of the period, the clock has no face and was designed only to strike hours. It is separated into two sections, the right-hand one being known as Going Train and the left-hand one as Striking Train. Each is driven by falling weights which have to be wound up once a day.*

From the church's point of view of 1386, other than going to worship, why else would people need to know the time. You got up when the sun rose in the morning and you went to bed when the sun set. You sparingly used candles because wax was expensive and it wasn't as though you needed a candle to read for a while before drifting off to sleep. Books were hand copied and created, extremely expensive, and most people could not read anyway. Books, few though they were, were usually chained to tables in church or royal libraries, for the exclusive use of the elite. Nature determined how you spent each day and the cathedral clock told you when was worship.

Agricultural understandings led people to plant in springtime and harvest in autumn, to keep some crops away from others while planting certain crops together. How to care for livestock was knowledge passed down from one generation to another. Wisdom was

shared about herbs and flowers and grasses, with their healing properties or their ability to beautifully dye wool and fabric. A close eye to the seasons and the need to coordinate one's life to the rhythm of those seasons was taught to the children by their parents, and so life continued.

The calendar was not written down on paper; the calendar was known in the colour of the leaves and the size of the crops, in the birthing of lambs and calves, piglets and chicks; in the lengthening or shortening of hours of sunlight, in the warmth or coolness of the days. The rhythm of nature was the calendar of the typical woman or man.

But the church taught that there was another calendar, another schedule, another way of understanding time and the rhythm of the seasons. This calendar was based not on nature but on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, on the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and on the birth and expansion of the church. Not that this calendar was in opposition to the natural calendar most people lived by.

Much has changed since the installation of the Salisbury clock in 1386. Actually let's say virtually everything has changed since then, those of course many things also have stayed the same. Parents still pass their knowledge of life, their experiences and their learnings, onto their children; agriculture is still dependent upon the rhythm of the four seasons; and the church still follows a form of a calendar not dissimilar to the 1300s.

Next Sunday we will begin another year of following that calendar. We will begin with Advent, four Sundays of preparation for the birth of Jesus at Christmas. To guide us through the year we will follow the lectionary, which is a collection of bible passages chosen for each Sunday and for every special service of the year. A gospel reading will be included for each service, usually from Matthew, Mark or Luke, and depending upon the time of year, from John. The lectionary runs on a three year cycle, and each year is appropriately called Year A, B or C. Today is our last Sunday of year A and Matthew was the gospel read most often. We will start year B next Sunday, and the gospel of Mark will be our companion and guide until the conclusion of year B at the end of November 2021.

There are several advantages to using this collection of readings known as the *Revised Common Lectionary*. The first is that by reading in worship the lessons suggested for the day, we are engaging in an ecumenical act of Christian solidarity and cooperation. Most Sundays the lessons you hear at North Kildonan United Church will be the same readings proclaimed at other United Churches, as well as Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian churches, to name but a few. In our scattered and at times divided world, knowing that Christians in other places are sharing in the same readings that we are, is a comforting and encouraging sign. And it can make for some lively discussions when members of various congregations happen to reflect together on how their particular preacher interpreted those readings.

The lectionary also opens us up to the fullness of scripture. Preachers and congregations are presented with passages that are challenging, confusing or just plain difficult at times, which means we are forced to struggle with the Word. Left to our own devices, preachers might be tempted to stay with tried and true safe biblical topics, and congregations may subtly or not so subtly encourage or direct their preacher to stay away from biblical areas that make them uncomfortable. But the discipline of the lectionary frees us from the temptation of safely remaining in harbour and never actually setting out to sea. The temptation to never actually engage with the scriptures.

With all this in mind, and I should offer an apology to those listening who are fully versed in the church calendar and lectionary and perhaps a touch bored with the foregoing, with all this in mind, let's briefly review the lessons for this day.

First of all, today in the church calendar. In 1925, in reaction to what he was seeing in society and in the world, Pope Pius XI instituted the Feast of Christ the King. Silas Henderson says this about Christ the King: *"a world that had been ravaged by the First World War . . . had begun to bow down before the 'lords' of exploitative consumerism, nationalism, secularism, and new forms of injustice. . . . Pope Pius envisioned a dominion by a King of Peace who came to reconcile all things, who came not to be served but to serve."*

So, what was going on in 1925 that so troubled the pope? Mussolini became dictator, the Ku Klux Klan had 5 million members, 40,000 of whom marched in Washington, D.C., Hitler resurrected the Nazi party, and the Spanish flu epidemic had ended just years before. Just to name a few events and four years later, the bottom would fall out of the stock market and the Great Depression began. Not necessarily happy days.

The feast day of Christ the King was one answer the church had to the upset and division all around the world actually. An answer that rejected the trappings of civic and economic power and refocussed Christians on the example of service and self-sacrifice as found in Jesus. Follow King Jesus, take seriously the gospel message and not the kings and dictators of the world was the pope's approach. In time, Christ the King became the Reign of Christ for many denominations and because it is now placed at the end of the church year, it is more a celebration of the risen and ascended Christ than a challenging of political and economic powers.

The Hebrew Scripture for today is from Ezekiel and within this passage we hear the prophetic word that there will be a shepherd appointed by God who will lead God's people. Named David in our passage, Christians see this shepherd as David's descendent, Jesus Christ.

Our reading from Ephesians rejoices in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the hope that gives us, proclaiming Jesus as the one who rules above all earthly powers. As we

heard: *"you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come."*

For the last two Sundays we have been reading from the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of the gospel according to Matthew, and today we complete the chapter. On first reading, or first hearing, it does sound frightening and all of us might feel condemned or at least challenged in our generosity and charity.

But perhaps we might understand this passage as a wakeup call or a wellness check on where our heart really is. When we reflect on it, we affirm that God created the world in love, an overflowing abundance of love. In the gift of Jesus and of the Holy Spirit, God shows God's own self in such an extravagance of love. We in turn love because God loves us first. So then, how free are we to share this love? The righteous in our gospel were surprised when their acts of compassion and generosity were named. *"When did we do these compassionate things to you, Lord,"* they ask. *"When you care for the least, the ones who can't repay you, then you do it to me,"* the Lord replies.

May God grant us courage and generous hearts to share our blessings with the Christ we meet in friend or stranger. Amen.

### **The Blessing of Prayer Shawls.**

There are times when we feel the need to put into tangible form our love and concern for others. The knitters of our congregation have created these wonderful prayer shawls as extensions of their caring for those in need. Attached to each shawl are these words: *"Made by hand and threaded with prayers of love and hope, this shawl is a gift for you. May it bring blessings of comfort, gifts of warmth, and knowledge that you are loved."*

This day we dedicate and bless these prayer shawls, with the hope that they will be both comfort and strength to those who will receive them and we acknowledge with thanks the work and ministry of our prayer shawl knitters.