

There are two images which come back a number of times in the prayers and readings in today's liturgy, that of the king and that of the shepherd.

Although both figures were very much a part of the experience of people in the ancient near east, that is much less so with us. Whatever sense we have of them has, in many cases, come from books read to us as children or from the biblical stories themselves. For me personally the image of the shepherd is the more evocative of the two. It speaks of those who protect and defend, care for and guide the flock entrusted to them.

In today's reading from the book of Ezekiel, the prophet, speaking in the name of God, has condemned the failures of the king and other leaders of his time to shepherd the people entrusted to them. And so God declares through him, "I myself will be their shepherd. I will gather those who have been scattered; I will bring back the strayed and bind up the injured."

Today's psalm is both widely known and deeply loved. Although it reflects the rural and traditional culture in which it was written, its language is able to reach across all that separates our experience from that of the original author and to speak to our feelings and emotions, our hopes and fears. It is a psalm of trust. "The Lord is my shepherd," the psalmist declares, "I shall not want." He is

confident that God is and will remain with him. “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” It is a psalm that we can recite at almost any time in the course of our life but especially at difficult and challenging moments in it. It speaks to us in a deeply consoling way in the face of death.

If the Old Testament in these and other texts celebrates God as the shepherd of his people and of individuals among them, the New Testament applies the same imagery to Jesus. The Gospel of John uses images of various kinds including that of the shepherd to give expression to the life-giving, life-nourishing role that Jesus plays in our life. “I am the good shepherd,” he declares. “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

In the first Letter of Peter, the risen Christ is described as the guardian and shepherd of our souls. Later in the same letter the image of the shepherd is applied to church leaders who are urged “to tend the flock of God that is in your charge ... so that when the chief shepherd appears you will win the crown of glory.”

Today’s gospel relates the two images of king and shepherd to the theme of judgment. It describes that moment at the end of human history when all the

nations of the world will be gathered before the risen Christ who will divide them into two groups, as a shepherd divides sheep from goats.

The most striking thing about the reading is the norm or criterion on the basis of which the division is to be made. It has to do with the way we treat one another, especially the way we treat those who are the most vulnerable and the most in need. The parable mentions in particular those who are hungry or thirsty, naked or sick, in prison or a stranger, someone who has come among us from some distant place.

As if to underline the importance of our reaching out in a helpful way to such people, Jesus declares that what we do or do not do to them, we do or do not do to him.

The apostle Paul, in today's reading and in a number of his letters, suggests a relationship between Christ and Adam. Just as we by our common humanity are all one in Adam, we are called to be one in Christ in whom human life has been healed and opened up in a new way to God and to life in him. We are brothers and sisters in Christ, just as he is in us. To abuse, to defraud, to insult, to do violence to other human beings is to abuse, defraud, insult and do violence to Christ. The fact that we don't think about it is, as the parable makes clear, no

excuse. Whether you did it consciously or not, Jesus says, what “you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.”

In the same way that ordained and non-ordained ministers are entrusted with a shepherding role in the community of the church, so all of us are called to exercise an analogous role in the broader society. Words like caring for, protecting, nurturing and building up, apply to what should go on in our families and neighbourhoods, in our city and country. They also apply to our attitude to the earth, our common home as Pope Francis calls it, and to our new found sense of responsibility for its well-being and for the well-being of its inhabitants, especially those who will suffer the most from the damage we are all doing to it.

There are some people who by their gifts and education, their experience and the responsibilities that are theirs through their work, are able to have a greater impact on the challenges facing our world than others. We all, however, can do something. It is not said in today’s gospel that those who are judged negatively have done anything evil. What they are condemned for is that they have not done the good which they could and should have done. Let us not make their mistake.