

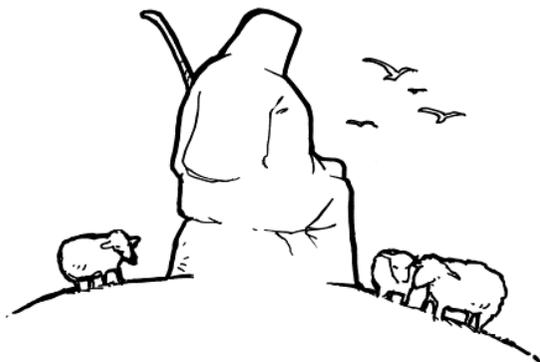
## PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

### Feast of Christ the King – Year A

#### First Reading: Ezekiel 34: 11–12, 15–17

Ezekiel, a great prophet and priest, spoke this message during conflict between the Israelites and the Babylonians who had already taken about 8,000 Israelites into exile. He brings a message of hope that God will look after them and restore them to their life in their homeland.

Ezekiel thought that the leaders of his people were irresponsible and unwise (Ezekiel 34: 1–10). So he encourages the people by telling them that God himself will be their leader, a responsible shepherd-leader who will search and care for all of them, whether wounded, weak, healthy, stray, or in exile: he will bring them all to rest.



The image of the shepherd is often used in ancient Near Eastern literature as a metaphor for a king, hence the choice of this reading on the feast of Christ the King.

Ezekiel builds on motives familiar to the people, particularly through Psalm 22 (23), 'The Lord is my Shepherd'.

St John, in turn, will pick up this image in his Gospel: 'I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd is the one who lays down his life for his sheep' (John 10: 11) – rather than one who 'rules them cruelly and violently' (Ezekiel 34: 4).

The Lord's Kingship is above all concerned with love and justice. He will judge people according to these values. St Matthew uses a similar phrase in today's Gospel: 'He will separate people one from another as the shepherd separates sheep from goats'.

## Gospel: Matthew 25: 31–46

### Historical background

The devotion to Christ's Kingship was addressed in the encyclical *Quas Primas* of Pope Pius XI, published in 1925. The Pope quotes Cyril of Alexandria, saying 'Christ has dominion over all creatures, a dominion not seized by violence nor usurped, but by essence and by nature'.

Pope Pius XI wanted to remind Christians that their allegiance was to their spiritual ruler in heaven as opposed to an earthly leader – who at that time, in Italy, was the fascist Mussolini.

As is now the custom on this last Sunday of the liturgical year, we celebrate the feast of Jesus Christ our Universal King.

### The Son of Man

We are advised not to take St Matthew's account of the final judgement in too literal a sense. He is painting a kingly portrait of Jesus, first by having Jesus refer to himself as 'the Son of Man' (v. 31). This title has been used in different ways throughout the Scriptures but here it is used triumphantly, as in Daniel 7: 13–14.

### The sheep and the goats

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus uses the familiar imagery of the work of the shepherd, continuing the theme of today's first reading. Jesus vividly describes how the King will divide the nations into two types of people: the 'blessed' and the 'cursed' (or the sheep and the goats).

### The King's standard of judgement.

Jesus clearly details what the King requires of his people if they are to become citizens of his Kingdom.

It is notable that none of the attributes required are religious in nature, nor is there any mention of commandments or laws being kept or broken. His listeners – both the 'sheep' and the 'goats' – are surprised by the criteria Jesus presents to them. Both types of people have failed to recognise that what they have done for others, they have actually done for God, their Lord and King. The love they have withheld from others they have in fact withheld from God.

It is to the attitude of people that our attention is drawn. The 'blessed' are loving to others without any thought of self. Those addressed as 'cursed' are in effect saying that if they had known the one in need of help was God and not some insignificant person, then they would have acted differently. The 'cursed' who were condemned had done nothing morally wrong – but rather they had done nothing at all.

