

Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> November 2017

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

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**HYMNS:**    317    **“At the name of Jesus”**  
              256    **“When I needed a neighbour were you there”**  
              732    **“Day of judgement! Day of wonder!”**  
              658    **“A charge to keep I have”**

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**READINGS:** Ephesians 1: 11-23  
                  Matthew 25: 31-46

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### ***“AN INHERITANCE”***

“Inheritance” – that was the word which jumped out at me as I read our lesson from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians in preparation for today’s service. “In Christ we have obtained an inheritance.” That is quite a statement. Those of us who call ourselves Christians, those of us who seek to follow Jesus Christ – we have an inheritance – we have it already – it is not something just for the future – the inheritance of Jesus can be ours now.

Again Paul says to the Christians in Ephesus, “I pray that you may know what are the riches of Christ’s glorious inheritance among the saints. In other words we have such a wonderful inheritance if only we claim it and live it we are already saints.” In other words we have such a wonderful inheritance if only we claim it and live it – then, we, too are worthy to be called ‘saints.’

This may seem a bit over the top from Paul – so let us do some thinking about the word, ‘inheritance.’ Each of us here today has an inheritance – we have an inheritance which is unique to each one of us and we also have an inheritance which is shared with various groups of people. Each of us here has a genetic inheritance – unique to us – from our parents immediately and more generally from our family lineage. It is this inheritance that gives us the specific shape of our face, shape of our ears, the colour of our complexion and hair, our height and body shape. We have family likenesses – very strong in some families but there for all of us. When a child is born we look intently to see what likeness there is, what family inheritance is visible.

But we have other things which we inherit – some of which we are scarcely aware of until it is pointed out to us or we realise when we enter another culture. We inherit cultural characteristics – ways of behaving and ways of thinking. Most importantly we inherit a language – a language rich in idiom, rich in vocabulary which has been added to and developed generation after generation and to which we, in our turn, are adding. We also inherit cultural riches – traditions in music, art, theatre and dancing. Just think how life would be if we did not have such an inheritance to draw on and that each generation had to start from scratch. Each week we sing hymns and listen

to music whose history stretches back centuries and whose influence inspires the composers of our generation.

And there is another sort of cultural inheritance which binds peoples and nations together – the communal ceremonies which we celebrate and commemorate as we did two weeks ago on Remembrance Sunday.

Some of us may think of ‘inheritance’ in a very material way because fortunate people gain money or property from previous generations. We know that this sort of inheritance can cause problems and dissension in families as possessions or land or money are fought over.

Apart from the last comment, I have talked of ‘inheritance’ in a morally neutral or positive way up to now but we would be deceiving ourselves if we did not consider the fact that there are also negative situations which we inherit. We see this in children who inherit genetic problems which lead to disease or disabilities in life. We see it also in children whose childhood has been disfigured by neglectful or abusive parents. We see it in families where the inheritance is one of continual in-fighting, jealousy and violence.

And we see negative inheritance in nations, too. This last week we have been reminded by the trial of Ratko Mladic, of the terrible conflict in the 1990s in the Balkans, the genocide of Muslims at Srebrenica and the toxic legacy which still simmers just below the surface of life in those areas even now.

We know it closer to home, too. The long years, even centuries of violence – the inheritance of visceral hatred between groups in Northern Ireland. How terrible it would be if one of the unintended consequences of Brexit could be a resurgence of old issues in Ireland.

I have been thinking a lot this week about this ambiguous nature of inheritance in relation to the momentous events in Zimbabwe. When I was in Zambia in the 1970s Zimbabwe, or Rhodesia as it still was then, was a place to be envied in many ways – the economy was good and in contrast to Zambia at that time you could get cheese, ice cream and fruits of all kinds. People who could afford to went from Zambia to do their shopping across the border. The education system was one of the best in Africa.

Yes, there were lots of things wrong in colonial Rhodesia which we should not overlook or underestimate – gross inequalities in land distribution and wealth, petty apartheid and a domination by the white minority over the black majority.

After I moved south to Botswana there was a changed situation in Rhodesia. The independence struggle was long, brutal yet ultimately successful. Majority rule came and there was a black President, Robert Mugabe – a catholic Christian who had had a good education and was intellectually very capable. Most of the prominent

politicians had a Christian background and the thorough grounding of a mission school education. At the outset that inheritance bore fruit – the extension of education, the development of a more comprehensive health care system and efforts to create more jobs.

But then, living in Botswana as I did by then, we soon began to realise, in the late 1980s and 1990s that something was not well across the border. Those considered enemies of the regime in Matabeleland were harassed, tortured and killed. Refugees fled in hundreds across Botswana's northern border – camps were set up, Zimbabwean teachers and pupils were accepted in schools throughout the country. There was a similar flow of people across the border in to South Africa.

The positive inheritance of Zimbabwe was in danger of being sacrificed on the altar of one-party control and retention of power at all costs. Where once people had flocked into Zimbabwe for all that was good – now people flowed out across the borders – seeking employment, the necessities of life and a future for their children.

So, as we listen to the news from Zimbabwe and pray for the future of the nation, what everyone is asking is, which inheritance will the new government take forward. Let us pray with all our strength that it will be the inheritance of a well-educated, highly Christian community, committed to true democracy that transcends ethnic differences and seeks the economic well-being which can be the inheritance of a country endowed with such rich natural resources.

And so back to our Christian inheritance as spoken of by St Paul in his letter to the Christians in Ephesus. Today Churches celebrate the festival of Christ the King and it is a day on which we remember that our Christ was not the usual sort of King, not a person to wield power from on high but a servant King. Christ the King was totally misunderstood by his contemporaries – that is why they killed him.

Jesus Christ was a King who suffered for the sake of God's people, whose life was a life of service, a life of love and compassion. It is this we have as our inheritance if only we are willing to lay claim to it. As Christians we are the children of God, we have that inheritance of family likeness not only with the God who created us and the Son who died for us but also through the generations of faithful people – saints – who have gone before us and passed on an abundant inheritance of faith.

Let us each remember by name some of those from whom we gained our inheritance – faithful grandmothers who sat children around them and told them Bible Stories, Sunday school teachers who week by week instructed the young and prayed with and for them and preachers and ministers who made the Bible come alive and relevant for us. All of this is our inheritance, together with the wonderful treasury of hymns and church music.

We have the great inheritance of faith as individuals, as families and as church communities. We have the imprint of Christ on us – his DNA and we have read the Scriptures and absorbed the Jesus way of being.

As we have seen with the recent history of Zimbabwe – one's inheritance for good can be easily squandered. Mugabe had a good inheritance of faith and education – he carried it forward well until he forgot that the essence of it is service not lust for power, living for others not living for self and family. He, like so many other leaders came to have a n obsession with his legacy – a legacy of lust for power and the establishment of a family dynasty. Such a legacy is so different from that of Jesus, who though he was equal to God, gave up everything in the service of humanity. Jesus, who did not cling to equality with God but emptied himself and gave himself up to death, even death on a cross.

This is the inheritance into which we have been embraced – we have an inheritance that can never perish as long as we ensure that we are prepared to suffer and serve as Jesus did.

So how do we seek to claim this inheritance and not allow our own weakness and self-seeking to lead us astray? Our passage from Mathew gives us one clear way ahead.

*“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom  
Prepared for you from the foundation of the world – for I was hungry  
and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me drink,  
a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you gave me clothing, sick and you  
took care of me, in prison and you visited me.”*

A life of service to the least and the lowest, the marginalised and the outcast – that is our inheritance from Jesus and the legacy that we are called to leave for those who will follow us.

Let us claim that inheritance today and every day. Amen.