

**The Rev. Mary Haggerty**  
**St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church – Florissant, MO**  
**Proper 28, November 15, 2020**  
**Matthew 25:14-30**

Today marks the end of the liturgical year. It's not quite the end of 2020 that we are all anxiously awaiting, but it is the end of our cycle of readings that has taken us through the whole story of our salvation. And it's the end of Matthew's discourse on discipleship. We have been hearing parables these past few weeks about how to live as disciples as we await the return of the King. Today we celebrate that King on what is called, in many traditions, Christ the King Sunday. This title for a feast day makes some Christians uncomfortable. In fact, the feast is unofficially celebrated in some Episcopal parishes, but it is not mentioned in the Episcopal calendar of the church year.

Kings and queens through the ages haven't been much of a model for how to live a life of discipleship. Take the Netflix series, "The Crown," for example. Bill and I can't stop watching the new season that was just released. It's a chilling portrait of power that is completely divorced from the reality of daily living for most people. Whether it's true or not, it portrays royalty as self-serving power to be hoarded at all costs.

So no, that is not a model for us as disciples. But it is exactly why Pope Pius XI declared this day a feast in 1925. The feast emerged to counter the powerful claims of secularism and fascism that were on the rise following World War I. It serves as an antidote to the kind of power portrayed in "The Crown." The claim we celebrate today is that Christ is the real ruler of this age and of all ages. Christ is our King. But a miniseries about this King would look quite different from the one many of us have been following these days on Netflix.

The prophet Ezekiel lays out a different kind of Kingship in our first reading this morning. This passage comes just after Ezekiel has condemned the rulers or shepherds of the day for not taking proper care of their sheep. It's as if God is saying, "step aside and let me show you what a real shepherd king looks like." This shepherd will rescue the people from abuse and neglect. He will feed the sheep near water, in good pasture, and with justice, as opposed to the shepherds who feed themselves. This shepherd King, the God of Israel, doesn't just walk beside the afflicted, he *rescues* them from the affliction. God doesn't just prepare a table for the righteous, but God forces the fat and strong to choke down a meal of justice. This shepherd King doesn't blast the people with hellfire and brimstone, he calls them to transformation by feeding them a meal of justice that will satisfy a hunger they didn't even know they had. Justice is a bitter meal for the oppressors, but it is their path to redemption.

This is the redemption that Matthew points to in our Gospel this morning. This kingdom that is ruled by compassion and driven by care for the least rather than protection of the powerful is the "kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." This final judgement is not about God as harsh judge waiting to catch us. It's about God, our shepherd king, who wants us to be ready, who has always wanted us to be ready, from the foundation of the world, to take our place as sheep in his flock. Can we hear these words not as a formula to avoid punishment or as a test to pass, but as God's deepest desire for us? Can we hear in these words the invitation to live a life of overflowing love?

The king we celebrate today is not a remote supreme being out there somewhere in the clouds. Our God is not walled up in a palace disconnected from our lives. Christ our King is here among us in the messiness of human life. Christ is here especially in our neighbor, the one who is most vulnerable and in need. This Son of Man who will come in glory, is also the one

who comes to us in the hungry, the thirsty, the sick and vulnerable. This is the King we are invited to discover in places we might least expect.

But this is no holy scavenger hunt, where we check off one hungry person, a thirsty one, one in prison. We can't chalk up good deeds as our ticket to eternity. This kingdom, remember, has been prepared for us from the foundation of the world. We don't bring it about on our own. We don't earn it. We can only open our eyes to discover it. We can look around us, beyond our own wants and needs, and see Christ in the most unlikely of places. We can move out of our comfort zone and into surprising places that teach us what love is.

Matthew makes it seem very clear, black and white. Good and evil. Sheep and goats. But the truth is, it's not always that clear. Do you roll down your window on a busy off ramp and give a few bucks to someone with a sign? Or do you not encourage begging? And who is the least among us? It might be someone in line at TEAM waiting to get food, or it might be someone right under your own roof. And it's not always about physical needs. The least of these might also have emotional and spiritual needs. We aren't always going to get it right. But even when we get it wrong, the invitation still stands. We are invited to keep trying to see the world with the eyes of God, our shepherd-king. Then we don't have to go looking for good deeds to make us holy. We will naturally see who is hungry and thirsty among us. We will be able to admit when we are sick or imprisoned by something we can't let go of and to allow God's love to come to us through another member of the flock.

Today, as we come to the end of the church year and as we prepare to enter the season of Advent, we see a vision of the Kingdom that has been prepared for us – a kingdom of overflowing love ruled by the one who loved us first. May this Advent be a time for us, even as 2020 continues to wear on us, especially as 2020 wears on us, to begin the story all over again

and to take in the depth of the love that our God and shepherd king has for us. And may that send us into the world as bearers of God's love to those who need it most.