

The King, With Justice

Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey

Ezekiel 34:11-16; Matthew 25:31-46

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

November 22, 2020 – Christ the King Sunday

Christ the King Sunday is the last Sunday in the Christian liturgical year. Next week will begin the season of Advent, when we will look back to the birth of Christ, and look forward to the return of Christ to set the world aright. As we bring the current liturgical year to a close, we stop what we are doing to call to mind the *nature* of the One whose coming we will pray for during Advent. For we are not just waiting for a typical king. We are not just waiting for another king who will try to control and coerce and accumulate and taunt, like the foolish and greedy shepherd-kings who are rebuked in Ezekiel 34. We are waiting for Jesus Christ, the Good King, to return. It is his kingdom we are seeking, and it is his kingdom that will come to pass.

We also pause to call to mind all that has happened in the last year. It seems to not be much of an understatement to say that *the world has changed* since December 2019. So much has happened in the last 12 months. It is almost hard to comprehend how much our rhythms and habits of life have changed in the last year. In fact, I'd invite you right now, to pause and take a deep breath, as you hold all that shifted, all that has changed, all that has been suffered, all that has been rearranged in the last year. God is present to all of it, and God invites us to consciously bring all of it with us as we turn to God.

What we know, of course, is that the turning of a liturgical year will not mean that these changes, these losses will magically disappear. In the coming year, we will continue to deal with the pandemic, which has now claimed 250,000 lives in our country, even as we move steadily towards what promises to be positive news with vaccines. We will continue to come to terms with the realities of racial injustice and stubbornly persistent beliefs about white supremacy. We will continue to live in a polarized society, where hostility and contempt ricochet around our hearts and our families and our country.

Christ the King Sunday wants to teach us that all of that – the past with its griefs, the present with its challenges, and the future with its possibilities – is governed and held by our King, Jesus Christ. And when we sit with our remarkable texts this morning, from Ezekiel 34 and especially Matthew 25, which Carol just read for us, we are given decisive indications about the directions that Jesus is moving.

Matthew 25 is an exceedingly important text for the community that gathers around Jesus. It is a text that, down through the ages, has inspired countless people towards lives of attentiveness to those on society's margins, and not just among Christians. A Muslim imam recently told a gathering that Matthew 25 was a profoundly moving text to him.¹ Its recurring refrain of "I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me drink, stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you gave me clothing, sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me" draws our attention to our neighbors who are vulnerable, shoved to the side, and forgotten by the powers of the world. As much as any other Scripture passage, Matthew 25 provides encouragement, energy, and motivation to organize our lives – not around climbing up the world's ladders of status and power – but *climbing down* to be present and attentive to the neighbor who is in need. Though Lewinsville's WHY statement does not specifically cite Matthew 25, when we say that this congregation exists 'to love and serve God by responding to human need,' we are drawing on Matthew 25's fund of imagination to make that claim.

And what we must notice is that this text is not merely a sociological statement about the gap between the rich and the poor. It makes a *theological* claim about the nature of the kingdom of God, for whom Jesus is its Lord and Savior. This passage is a *revelation* about divine kingship, and it undoes all of our assumptions about where to find a king, what a king will be interested in, and how a true king operates.

The text describes the Son of Man coming in glory, sitting on the throne of his glory, gathering before him the nations of the world, separating them as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. This shepherd is then referred to as "the king." The king draws the attention of the sheep and the goats to the starving hungry and thirsty, the excluded stranger, the vulnerable naked, the desperately sick, and the incarcerated prisoner, those who are referred to generally as the least of these. The king says that what you do to them, you do to the king. Your relationship to this king is expressed through the way you relate to the least of these. This king does not just sympathize with the least of these. This king *identifies* with the least of these. The homeless person you pass on the street, that is this king. The drug addict who is having trouble getting clean and sober, that is this king. The incarcerated one on death row, that is this king. The one suffering from the ravages of COVID-19, that is this king. The person in your family that always gets on your nerves, that is this king. The person with whom you have profound political disagreements, that is this king. Anyone whom you might be inclined to categorize as "the least of these." Matthew 25 takes Genesis 1's announcement that all humans bear the image of God, and extends that to the announcement that the incarnate King has not only given his image to the neighbor in need, but that the incarnate King is found in the neighbor in need.

¹ As described by Bruce Douglass, about a recent gathering at Georgetown University.

According to Matthew 25, true, authentic kingship – true, authentic, power - is not primarily to be found among pomp and circumstance, and long, flowy robes, but among the needs and the hurts of real people, especially those at the outskirts of well-being. As NT scholar Stan Saunders says, the divine king is found “among those whose lives seem least to embody the world’s notions of power and glory.”² *Divine power is found in human vulnerability and weakness.* That’s how it is for this king, and that’s how it is for his followers.

Matthew 25 is an exceedingly important text for us. This passage has provided the grounding for an initiative of the Presbyterian Church (USA) called ... wait for it ... the Matthew 25 Initiative. This is an initiative that invites congregations to draw their attention to three different areas – dismantling structural racism, eradicating systemic poverty, and building congregational vitality.

Lewinsville’s Session recently voted to join the Matthew 25 initiative, particularly focusing on the area of working to dismantle structural racism. Pastor Jen and I both have particular energy around this area, we both believe this is incredibly important for us as a church, and we are looking forward to working together as a congregation in the coming year around things that we have to learn about the reality of racism: ways we have, even unconsciously, participated in racial injustice; the history of racial injustice in our country and our own community; learning where positive and constructive steps have been taken to address it, and identifying things that we can do ourselves to be more actively anti-racist. How this involves us as individuals, how we are involved as a community.

As a predominantly white congregation, this journey will largely be a journey of learning for us. From the little bit of work that I have begun to do in this area, I can tell you that the learning can, at times, be difficult and is often humbling. We’ve got a lot to learn. But I can also tell you that, in this work, you can begin to feel layers of defensiveness peel away, allowing a greater freedom to emerge.

What Matthew 25 makes me realize is that these are not just matters of sociology, and they are certainly not just matters of political correctness. This is a journey that has to do with our relationship to our neighbor. And according to Matthew 25, the neighbor – every neighbor, especially those whom we would not normally expect – has sacred value, and is a primary place for our relationships with Jesus Christ, our true King. To the triune God, the divine fellowship of love, be all glory, honor, and power. Amen.

² Stanley P. Saunders, *Preaching the Gospel of Matthew: Proclaiming God’s Presence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) 260-261.