

November 26, 2023
Lectionary 34, Year A
Christ the King
Matthew 25:31-46
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Blessed are the Merciful

After celebrating a lovely Thanksgiving with family and friends on Thursday, and shopping, getting our Christmas tree, and watching the UConn women's basketball team lose a game on Friday, by Saturday of this holiday week, it was time for me to start getting serious about some picture projects that I'm need to get ready for Christmas presents. So, I settled myself in our basement, which my family affectionately calls "Mommy's Cave" and I got started on some crafting and TV watching.

My binge-watching show of choice was, The Crown on Netflix. I have already watched much of the show, but after season four I took a break from it though not for any particular reason that I can remember. It was probably just that I felt like watching something new. So, I turned it on to season 5 and have been catching up.

In retrospect, I do wonder if I didn't pick start watching The Crown again, because subconsciously, I was preparing for this Sunday, for Christ the King Sunday. I admit, the deeper I got into the season the more that I was struck by some parallels between the institution of the monarchy and the church.

For centuries, the British monarchy was a given in the world, ruling over nations and ultimately an empire. Even with the rise of parliamentary democracy in England, still the monarchy was a given, built into the constitution of the British people, expected and respected. In The Crown's fictionalized take on Queen Elizabeth II's reign, the Queen has a clear sense of herself as a servant and a symbol for her people her nations and the commonwealth. She considered herself to be

inevitable, an embodiment of the identity of the British people in all of their differences and diversity.

But as the 20th century progressed a question is increasingly asked by the show that it seems is also regularly asked by the British people. It's a question that we heard a lot of in the midst of the festivities surrounding the coronation of Queen Elizabeth's son, King Charles III, after her death. "Is the monarchy still relevant?" Is the institution of the monarchy still necessary? Does it make sense for a free and democratically governed people to consider themselves to be subjects of a monarch? Is a monarch still an appropriate symbol for a nation?

The very public missteps of so many of the people in the royal family, the infighting and the internal critiques of the institution by its very members make that question seem very relevant. But it's not a relevant question for me. Let that be one of the many questions in the world for which I do not have to be prepared to have an answer. The fate of the British Monarchy is not my circus, not my monkeys.

Still the irony of the questions surrounding the monarchy do not escape me, especially not on this Sunday of the church year, because, for many people, on an individual and institutional level the questions about the monarchy are the same kinds of questions that are being asked about the church.

Just as you don't have to have a deep interest in the future of the British monarchy to know that questions have been raised about it, you also don't have to be a serious researcher into all things religious to know that, for a long time now and at least since the turn of the century, religious engagement in the United States has declined. In fact, for the first time in the history of our country, in recent years, more people identify as not religiously affiliated than affiliated. This is not just a Christian phenomenon. It is across the board, in this country, in all Christian denominations and in all religions.

But, since I am a Christian, my focus is on how this phenomenon of disaffiliation is being played out in the church. That very much is both my circus and my monkeys.

I'm not sure that I really remember when this was the case, but I know that there was a time when the church was a given, an expectation, something that it felt inevitable that people would participate in and support. Of course, not everyone was religious and not everyone was Christian, but many were and they supported their churches and attended church activities at high levels. Churches were the center of people's families and of their social lives. Young people met their spouses at church activities. Men's groups and women's groups flourished. Churches housed playgroups for parents with young children. Sunday Schools were full. Churches had to build bigger buildings to hold their participants and their activities.

Sometimes churches, their leaders, their members did things that were unbecoming of the name of Christian, but still, congregations thrived.

But now, things have changed. Church activities are just one activity among many possible activities in people's lives, and church participation is far less common than it once was. Some people have a higher list of expectations for what a congregation must be doing in the world to be worthy of their support and its existence. The church has gone from being something that was considered to be a pillar of society, an inevitable piece of the social structure, to something whose relevance is frequently questioned.

So, my entertainment life The Crown and my actual life, where I am employed and a member and participant, are actually colliding today, as we celebrate a church festival, a day in the church year, that combines religion and monarchy. Way to be relevant! Way to be hip! Of course, people probably don't even say hip anymore.

Our gospel reading for today is from the 25th chapter of Matthew. It's the reading from which we draw the name of our Matthew 25 fund, the fund that we

use to assist people who are in need in our congregation and community. In the reading, Jesus in the gospel of Matthew tells his disciples about a vision, a future, when he, the Son of Man, will come again in glory to judge the world. In this vision, Jesus comes as king and separates the people of all nations into two groups, called in this reading, the sheep and the goats.

The sheep go to the right hand of this kingly Jesus and the goats to the left.

To the ones at his right hand the king says,

‘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, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family you did it to me.’ (Matthew 25:34b-40)

To those who are at his left hand he says:

‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you

hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ (Matthew 25:41-45)

The ones at the right hand of the king had shown mercy to the least, to the needy, to the suffering, and they learned, to their surprise, that in serving them they had served Jesus. The ones who had shown no mercy, no compassion for the suffering, had missed the opportunity to serve the embodiment of the living Lord of the universe, who had come to them in the poor and now came to them as their king and judge.

This is the final Sunday of the church year. And this story, this vision, this message from Jesus bookends our year. Because early in 2023, once we got through Advent and Christmas, on the fourth Sunday after Epiphany, which, in 2023 was January 29th, we heard these words from Jesus in the sermon on the mount:

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. (Matthew 5:7)

That was the promise, that those who showed mercy would receive mercy. And here in this vision from Jesus, which he shared with his disciples, just before the events of Holy Week began, we hear that promise fulfilled. Those who have shown mercy are the ones who receive mercy, from their God, from their judge, from their good shepherd, from their king.

And as for us, living in the in-between time, between promise and fulfillment, this is the final vision that we’ll have from the gospel of Matthew for another two years. And more importantly, these are the marching orders that we have from Christ our king. This is the vision that we have to carry us into the new year. This is the message that we have to carry us forward, into a new church year, into our celebration of Advent and Christmas, and into a new calendar year. And that message is that we are called to be people of mercy. People who show mercy to

each other and mercy to those around us, especially to those who are struggling or suffering.

I don't have answers to the question of the relevancy of monarchy. Honestly, I don't even have answers about the relevancy of the institution of the church as we have known and loved it, in a spiritual, but not religious society. But I do know this. I know that Christ, who comes to us in the needy, who comes to us a loving shepherd, who comes to us as king, have told us that mercy is our calling, and that in serving others, we serve him. So, for the new year, let us take that vision and that promise as our guide; that blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Amen.