

## Christ the King 2020

Well, we have finally come to the end of our little apocalypse in Matthew. We have survived the apocalypse! And here, at the very end, on the feast of Christ the King, we are given more insight into the hopes of the King of all kings. We are presented with two groups essentially. One group wants to challenge Jesus and say where did we see **you** hungry, and the other group is oblivious to their own good works. One group is avoiding the work of the Kingdom by constantly debating and considering while the others are simply doing. I wonder about this sometimes with the Episcopal Church and become terribly sad. I know it is best to reason out an approach that will be most effective but we can sometimes kill kindness with a committee. So much time is spent in our Church reasoning things out, all the while knowing people are hungry and suffering. In that way we can fail to live into one of our greatest Christian virtues – mercy.

Misericordia is the Latin term for mercy we mostly see in Christian art and literature. It combines terms for pity and heart. We think of the word misery only meaning deeply sad but in the Christian context it means feeling compassion for another. It is a Christian virtue. One reason I still like the word in its modern usage is because it asks us to feel something. We are invited to consider the plight of another and feel miserable. This is what I think Dr. King means when he talks about none of us being free until all of us are free. He seems to have a deep understanding of mercy, of Misericordia, of being miserable. How can I look upon the suffering of another and be happy. How can I be responsible for the suffering of another and be ok? In this sense it is true that until we are all ok, none of us is ok. Jesus says this very thing to his challenger. He tells him to open his eyes and see the suffering and make it his own, just as Jesus has done. And we are called to do the same. The pain of the sick, the dying, victims of racism, homophobia, neglect, abuse, and all sorts and conditions, this pain is our pain – these problems are our problems.

One inspirational person in our Church who is showing mercy is Rebecca Stevens. Rev. Becca Stevens is an author, speaker, Episcopal priest, social entrepreneur, founder and president of Thistle Farms in Nashville, Tennessee. She is notable for founding Magdalene in 1997, now called Thistle Farms, to heal, empower, and employ female survivors of human trafficking, prostitution, and addiction. If you go to Camp Washington you will see products sold by Thistle Farms at the office. Jasmine Road is an example of one of the 40 offshoots of Thistle Farms. It has a residential home, restaurant, jewelry store, and candle workshop as some aspects of its ministry in South Carolina. Their web site describes the ministry like this: Jasmine Road is South Carolina's first two-year residential program for adult women survivors of human trafficking, prostitution, and addiction. The organization joins more than 40 Thistle Farms sister communities around the country and serves to heal, empower, and employ local women survivors in our community.

Here at St. Mark's we are about to show mercy by participating in the Walk for Warmth with WAIM. And I hear stories of individuals who regularly give of themselves without hesitation to help those in need. Many of us have chosen career paths which, by their very nature are ways to serve and be merciful. We might wonder as we enter the season of Advent where else we are called to serve God's children as a parish. Maybe we need our own version of a Thistle Farms...

It is easy to get caught up in these passages from Matthew and wonder about if we might be sheep or goats, living righteously or not doing enough, if we will fall victim to God's judgement.

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The answer of course is yes to all of it. We are human and can always do more and we are Christians who have chosen a path which is kind and merciful. And overthinking these ideas can make us fall into a state of inaction. But I like to think of this in terms of negative space drawing. Maybe you have done this. Take a look at a folding chair and draw not the chair but the spaces between the chair and suddenly, without thinking about it, you have drawn the chair. Perhaps acting mercifully is a bit like this. If we focus on the spaces in between, the people who have fallen through the crack if you will, something takes shape naturally. Without being like the man in the gospel who always questions things, we can be merciful by tending to the spaces that have been forgotten, the emptiness, having confidence that at the end of the day, there will be a chair. Will we fret over perfection, about making enough chairs, or get about the work of the Kingdom? Will we kill kindness in committees or imitate the Great Shepherd of the sheep?

What happens when we stop worrying about making the perfect folding chair and wonder about those forgotten spaces in between. The shape of our neighborhood changes. The shape of our society changes. And this is what scripture refers to as justice. We get this from Ezekiel today. The connection is summed up in verse 16, where means for delivering care is justice: "I will feed them with justice." Justice and care are kept in balance, as if they were two sides of the same coin. Which is particularly interesting on the feast of Christ the King. Using the shepherd metaphor in the preface to his Law Code, for example, Hammurabi explains that he was appointed by the gods "to promote the welfare of the people, to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil that the strong might not oppress the weak." What the shepherd metaphor emphasizes, in Ezekiel, in Matthew's gospel, and even in other writings such as *Hammurabi's Code* is the ruler's responsibility to establish justice so that the people may flourish. Ezekiel believed that forgetting about justice, showing mercy throughout society particularly by the most powerful, led to the Babylonian exile. He believes it was the downfall of their society. But both Ezekiel and Jesus believe that when we all show mercy, it is the joy of a strong society.

On the occasion of Christ the King we are given two sides of one coin and I wonder if we see in this the perfect form of a king; one we might be proud to serve and imitate. There is mercy on a personal level – the idea of *Misericordia*. And the sister of mercy: justice, the application of mercy in society. Perhaps we consider Christ the King of all kings because we see in Jesus the perfect union of justice and mercy. We see in Jesus the model of a good shepherd who is able to care for the wellbeing of each sheep by caring for the flock, and vice versa. He is willing to leave the 99 in search of the one and because this is so, the flock lives in confidence and peace.

Earlier in Matthew's gospel Jesus is speaking with his disciples and he explains that the leaders of the Gentiles lord it over them but it is not to be so with them. Instead, the last among them will be first. And that is what we see in the gospel today. A way of life which crowns the one who is humble and merciful. A way of life which, when lived by an entire society, brings about a state of justice. A way of life where each looks after the other and no one is satisfied until all are content. This is the Kingdom we are invited into. This is the law of the land in the Kingdom of God. This is how we each receive a crown of glory that will never fade.