

**Date: 22 November 2020**

**Reading: Matthew 25:31 – 36**

**Theme: The Way of the King**



I'm quite intrigued by the TV series *The Crown*, an imaginative telling of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II. Maybe it's seeing history that is within my memory. The latest season covers events in the 1980's, including that wonderful little occurrence in 1982, at the height of the Falklands War, when a man broke in to Buckingham Palace and sat on the end of the Queen's bed to have a chat with the Queen. I'm not sure how accurate the telling is - the man involved is still alive and may have contributed to the script – but the background is that this is a simple man who is a victim of the system.

Some of you will remember the economic austerity of the 1980's, massive cuts in Government expenditure aimed at solving the problem of inflation. The immediate result was unemployment at levels that a lot of people today couldn't imagine – 12% in a time when there was little or no hourly work. This man – Michael Fagin – was an unemployed painter whose life had fallen apart. His wife had left him, and he was denied access to the children. Because the apartment was still in her name, he couldn't organise important repairs. Instead of spending money on public housing that would help people and give him a job, the Government was spending billions on a pointless war thousands of miles from Britain. The system that was supposed to help was so underfunded that it couldn't. He had tried to register complaints, even to his local MP, all to no avail. So, he decides to talk to the Queen to tell her about the state of her kingdom; she needs to hear from an ordinary person about how bad things are. Because that is the way it's supposed to work; the King – in this case the Queen – sets the standard for the kingdom. The head of state is supposed to care about the state of the state.

And that is what this parable about separating the people like sheep from goats – often called the judgement of the nations – is all about; the King is setting the standards of the kingdom. And the standards are not about economic health, or growth, or victory over enemies, or even religious practices or adherence to creeds. The standard that determines the state of the state is treatment of the least and the smallest; are the hungry fed, the strangers welcomed, the naked clothed, the sick and in prison visited? That is the King's standard for the way the kingdom should operate.

The details and images in this story have kept theologians and commentators going for centuries. Are the sheep and the goats the people of the nations who have accepted or not accepted the Gospel? Or are they members of the church and being separated like the parable of the wheat and the weeds? Is the separation into sheep and goats based on the judgement about treatment of the needy, or based on faith and the treatment of the needy is an example of that faith lived out? And who are the 'members of my family? A third

group apart from the sheep and goats? There is enough detail to allow for a number of different readings and interpretations. However, I see a lot of those interpretations circle around that main point – this is the standard of the kingdom – and open up ways for self-justification. People read themselves into the story as the sheep and pat themselves on the back as being ‘good and faithful servants’. Or they read themselves as the ‘these who are members of my family’, seated at Jesus feet, and enjoy the judgement on those who rejected the Gospel. They never read themselves as the goats who didn’t address the needs of the poor, the hungry, the strangers, the ill and the prisoners because they weren’t Christians. A reading that Matthew clearly wanted people to consider because he has placed this parable as part of a collection of parables about the behaviour of disciples waiting for the return of their Lord and Master. And just like we shouldn’t abuse other Christians or lord it over them, just like we shouldn’t fail to keep our faith alive, just like we shouldn’t bury our joy and faith, so we shouldn’t ignore the needs of the world around us. One more facet of what it takes to be faithful in this time of waiting for the fulness of God’s creation.

The power of this parable becomes clear when you also hear Paul’s description of Jesus as King:

“far about all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but in the age to come.”

When the parable says “all the nations”, it is declaring that this ‘way of the King’, this standard for the kingdom, supersedes all the standards and behaviours and allegiances of the nations and empires and states of the world. When Jesus says “when you behaved that way towards one of the least of these members of my family”, we can’t overwrite that with requirements of being a member of our church, or a citizen of our country, or a member of our race, or a member of our class or any other classification. If we claim that Jesus is King, then we are bound by the standards of that kingdom. The standard of addressing need, openly and lovingly. We can’t say, “We’ll feed the hungry, but only if they meet the Government classification of deserving. We can’t say, “We welcome the stranger but only if they have the right papers or look like us”. We can’t say, “We visit the prisoners, but only if they have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Saviour”. We can’t say, “Jesus is King, but only up to the point of conflict with political or cultural standards”.

The oldest name for our faith is, “Followers of the Way”. And this is the Way, the Way of love, compassion, justice and mercy. It has been pointed out to me that our creeds lack a call to action, they give the impression that all that is called for is intellectual and emotional assent to a set of beliefs. And that is sad, because the whole story of Jesus, and indeed the stories of the disciples in Acts, is full of action – healing, welcome, hospitality, justice. Love in action, just as the prophets kept telling Israel:

*“I hate, I despise your festivals and your solemn assemblies.  
Take away the noise of your songs;  
but let justice roll down like the waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”*

Some wonder how our faith, our worship and spirituality, connect with our life; and this is it! Just as James writes, “faith that does not show itself in acts of love is dead”. We are not called to great theology, or great worship, or great Bible knowledge; we are called to put all that theology and worship and Bible knowledge to work in acts of faith and love that address the needs of people around us. We have homeless here in Canterbury and Camberwell, we have lonely people in big houses, we have poor and hungry people in valuable properties, we have people needing help to navigate the complexities of a world increasingly designed for the young and digital savvy. And they are among the ones who Jesus claims as the least and smallest of his family. The ones we are called to because we claim Jesus as King and love is the standard of Jesus kingdom. Love, a verb, a call to action as Followers of the Way.

*Rev Ross Pearce* ©