

“The King Returns”  
Psalm 100:1-5; Ephesians 1:15-23;  
Matthew 25:31-46

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As we come to this particular passage, I want to note that it is not only the last passage of Matthew 25, it is one of the last passages of Jesus' teaching. This is really the end of his public ministry. From here, it goes into the events of Holy Week, preparing his disciples through the Passover meal and the time in the Garden of Gethsemane for his passion. There is some teaching that goes on there. He washes his disciples' feet. But this is the last of his teaching expositions. This is a moment when he has been trying to prepare his disciples for the time when he will be leaving them.

We know that he leaves and comes back, then leaves again. But this is really about preparing them for the fact that they will be headed into a time when they will be on their own. He won't be walking with them in the same way. So as we read the end of Matthew, there are a number of sections here. If we went through each of the stories, they would talk about what it means to be on our own and waiting again for Jesus to come. Certainly, over the last couple of weeks we have read through some of those.

Last Sunday's passage was comparing an earthly king to the kingdom of God. I suggested last week as we got to the end of that passage that there was a second ending. As we start today's passage, there is no more comparison. This is more a description of what it's like when the king comes back. That's why I called this the second ending. That other ending was about a king coming back and giving account to his servants, but we see a difference when we see Jesus coming back. I noted last week that it is about the currency, and we will get further into that as we go along.

I want to notice as we read through this passage it is about the son of man, the king returning, and what that means. Let me first talk about what it means to think about Jesus as king. Because, you see, in Jesus' time there was no distinction between the political power of king and the highest person in the religious order. The king was both. The king was over all of life. I think we have done something that is pretty important in our own political sphere. We have said we can't give that kind of power to one person. We can't give both the religious leadership and the political leadership to one person. It's overwhelming. It's more than one human being can handle. I think we've seen a lot of examples of where it has been misused. We're not Jesus.

Jesus, however, is a high king. The king over all. The king not only over the religious sector, over the political sector, over the economic sector, over social sector, you might say he is king of our lives, over it all. So, as we hear about the king coming back, we are given this perspective that this is the king over all of our lives. This description helps us focus not so much on the moment of his return, but what we have been up to before he came. You notice he doesn't start talking initially about what's going to happen. He talks about what's been going on.

As we hear him talk, it's incredibly interesting to me that he is focusing on what we've been up to while he's been away. He wants us to know that he is paying attention and that his currency, as I spoke about it last week, is different than an earthly king's. It's not about wealth. It is about using our gifts and graces to do good work, to show the love of God, and to show the love to neighbor. What he's asking us to do is to do that all in one swoop. He doesn't ask, "What do you believe?" He doesn't seem to divide these folks based on what they know. He divides them based on what they do, how they live out the grace and gifts they have been given. The currency of his kingdom seems to be compassion, for when he comes, he tells them, "When you have done these things, you have done it to me." It's as if the king was like the king in that old book, *The Prince and the Pauper*, where the prince decides to go among the people. Jesus is there.

Jesus suggests that when they have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, visited those in prison or captive, and cared for the sick, they have done it to him. He tells them, "When you have done all those things, you have done it to me, and you are righteous. You are in right relationship with God." There is some way in which when we live out that kind of life we are both loving God and loving neighbor. He describes the currency of the kingdom as compassion, as caring for one another.

Sometimes it feels like people suggest we pay too much attention to this particular passage. It seems, as Jesus comes to the end of his public ministry in Matthew, that he might be summing up what he wants us to know. I tend to think about how the very last thing somebody says in a speech or lecture is often a way they try to summarize it, pull it all together, make it have a little punch to get their point across. So, I think it's worth listening to, paying attention to. It's not just me. I don't think I'm the only one who thinks that way. Diana Butler Bass in her book, *A People's History of Christianity*, noted that during the Plague of Galen in 165-180, hundreds of thousands of people died in the streets. Think about that, folks. That's a 15-year plague. That's a little longer than I hope we are going to have to deal with our pandemic. She says, "Christians proved their spiritual mettle by tending to the sick. Because they did not fear death, Christians stayed behind in plague-ravaged cities while others fled. Their acts of mercy extended to all the suffering, regardless of class, tribe, or religion, and created the condition in which others accepted faith."

I'm not the only one who feels that what Jesus is saying here is central to what he is asking of us while we live together in this time and place and as we wait for the moment when he might return. Each of the stories in Matthew 25 have been encouraging us to keep up our motivation, to watch what's going on, to watch for how he might be showing up, to keeping our lamps burning, to remember that the king will return and that we can use our gifts and graces in this moment, and that when he returns he will recognize the righteous.

I'll admit, I'm more than a little uncomfortable with the last piece, the notion of accountability and how he is inviting us to be those people of compassion with one another, but then recognize that there are consequences to not having lived according to his guidance, to what he has called us to be and to do. That accountability is very stark in this passage. It is suggesting that one group gets to go into the joy of the master and that the other goes into the depths of being separated. In some ways, those who have shown compassion continue to receive compassion. Those who don't, reap what they have sown.

As we look at this passage, we can't help but see that Jesus is in strong terms calling his disciples to practice what he has preached. To practice his teachings. To show compassion. To live the currency of the kingdom rather than the currency of the world, and in doing so, be prepared for his return. For it is a passage that invites us to recognize that Jesus is our king, that God is over all of life, so God's son is as well. He is Lord of all, not just our religious life, but Lord of all of our life—economic, political, social—all of life. And as Lord of all life, he invites us to live out that currency of compassion, to know that being in right relationship with God is to love God and to love our neighbor, and to have that show up in how we live. To feed the hungry. To give drink to the thirsty. To welcome the stranger. To care for the sick. To visit those who are captive.

In some ways this passage, while it has both the beginning and the end, focuses on our life in God's kingdom on earth as we live out what it means to have Jesus as Lord, and to recognize we are accountable to him. He, I believe, hopes to bring us in as the righteous into the joy of the king, and not to leave us to reap the consequences of what we have sown.

So, we are invited to hear this last teaching of Jesus in his public ministry in Matthew and to engage in the currency of compassion. Amen.