

## **The Sunday Missive – November 26, 2023**

### **The Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **Hymn 494 Crown him with many crowns**

Crown him with many crowns, the Lamb upon his throne;  
Hark! how the heavenly anthem drowns all music but its own;  
Awake, my soul, and sing of him who died for thee,  
And hail him as thy matchless King through all eternity.

Crown him the Son of God before the worlds began,  
And ye, who tread where he hath trod, crown him the Son of man;  
Who every grief hath known that wrings the human breast,  
And takes and bears them for his own, that all in him may rest.

Crown him the Lord of heaven, enthroned in worlds above;  
Crown him the King, to whom is given, the wondrous name of Love.  
Crown him with many crowns, as thrones before him fall,  
Crown him, ye kings, with many crowns, for he is King of all.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kc3UnhPHTOo>

#### **The Collect of the Day**

Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords: Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

*Amen.*

#### **Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24**

Thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue

them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.

## **Psalm 95**

Come, let us sing to the Lord\* ***Let us shout for joy to the Rock of our salvation.***

Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving\* ***And raise a loud sound to him with psalms.***

For the Lord is a great God\* ***And a great King above all gods.***

In his hand are all the caverns of the earth\* ***And the heights of the hills are his also.***

The sea is his, for he made it\* ***And his hands have molded the dry land.***

Come, let us bow down, and bend the knee\* ***And kneel before the Lord our Maker.***

For he is the Lord our God\* ***And we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.***

### **Ephesians 1:15-23**

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

### **Hymn 510 Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove**

Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove, with all thy quickening powers;  
Kindle a flame of sacred love in these cold hearts of ours.

See how we trifle here below, fond of these earthly toys:  
Our souls, how heavily they go, to reach eternal joys.

In vain we tune our formal songs, in vain we strive to rise:  
Hosannas languish on our tongues, and our devotion dies.

Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove, with all thy quickening powers;  
Come, shed abroad a Savior's love, and that shall kindle ours.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmYrX638WM4>

## **Matthew 25:31-46**

Jesus said, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, '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.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, '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.'"

## **RSVP – Proper 29A**

As the Wolof proverb goes, *Ku tey xamoon njalbée, muj di noflaay*. If you begin well, the end will not trouble you.

In Psalm 95, familiar to us from Morning Prayer as the "Venite," of the first seven verses, three start with invitation: "Come, let us sing;" "Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;" and "Come...let us

kneel,” urging us to gather to acknowledge and willingly join the presence of the only benevolent higher power. These admonitions all convey a choice on our part, the choice of whether or not to pay attention to God. Each of our lives includes situations – to do with our health, our careers, our money, our relationships, wherein we can either think about wider and deeper implications or consequences, or just go with what feels good in the moment; where we choose whether or not to “Come.”

With the passage from Matthew we just heard, Jesus concludes his public teaching, and it seems as if Matthew want this to be what lingers in our ears, our take-home lesson. There is no parallel to this passage in either Mark or Luke; the parallels with this text are more pronounced in Revelation, Daniel and in Enoch -- amongst the Apocrypha.

Modern folks may object to the image of a king as being at best outdated and at worst overly paternalistic. But even if we support these criticisms, it is worth considering just what kind of sovereign God is. We note that in Ezekiel, written several centuries before Christ, the king does not rain down hellfire and brimstone on the people, instead handing out justice as would a good parent imposing discipline; more as a teacher than a tyrant.

We might wonder if the God of Israel is described as a male because that portrayal reflects some necessary and basic element of the Godhead, or because it reflects the power of those who articulated the paradigm. The same question also applies to Jesus of Nazareth as Christ the King. And the same inquiry can be followed with regard to the shepherding metaphor. But the issue is not whether these metaphors are more or less adequate than any others might have been; it is that human language will always fail to thoroughly describe God.

The readings for this Sunday proclaim Christ’s Kingship while reminding us that the world does not recognize it. Even those of us who self-identify as God’s people often fail to open our eyes to behold God’s glory. The shepherd has long been a descriptor of religious leaders. In the Hebrew Bible, judges, prophets, other leaders, God’s

self, and even death are portrayed as shepherds. It is useful to point out the close relationship between shepherds and kings in the Ancient Near East. The Hebrew word “to shepherd” also means “to rule.”

In our passage from St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he too makes it clear that we are in unknown and unknowable territory. He insists that our understanding of Christ is too simple, too human, too tentative. His claims, on the contrary are unrestricted: “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named.” Christ breaks every barrier of time and space that we can conceive of: “not only in this age but also in the age to come.” We are being asked to think of Christ in the broadest sense possible, as the one who contains all reality as we know it, who has no peers, and who, in exceeding both time and space reinvents both.

Here is Archbishop Oscar Romero: “Everyone who struggles for justice, everyone who makes just claims in unjust surroundings, is working for God’s reign, whether or not they are Christian. The Church does not comprise all of God’s reign; God’s reign goes beyond the Church’s boundaries. The Church values everything that is in tune with its struggles to set up God’s reign. A church that tries only to preserve itself pure and uncontaminated would not be a church of service to people. The authentic church is one that does not mind conversing with prostitutes and publicans and sinners, as Christ did – and with Marxists and those of various political movements – in order to bring them salvation’s true message.”

Finding ways to care for people around the world and around the block can also lead them to the awareness that they too can be shepherds. Matthew uses the phrase *panta te ethnè*, “all the nations.” We have no reason not to understand that phrase literally as referring to all people, in every place and for all time. When we do, we see that the conditions for salvation (nurture, hospitality, fellowship) apply to everyone. The implications for our understanding of godliness are profound. We are saved neither by grace alone, nor simply by declaring that we believe the gospel, but by how we treat one another. Our justification before God comes from works shaped by the pursuit of justice, indeed by an understanding of justice that centers on our behaviour towards “the least of these.”

Among the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, the only description of the last judgement is in Matthew 25. Here is nothing about church hierarchies or organizations; nothing about religious practices. There is not a word in this passage about theology, creeds or orthodoxies. There is only one criterion here, and that is whether or not you saw Jesus Christ in the face of the needy and whether or not you gave yourself away in love in his name.

As the proverb goes, *Ay wax yu baax, du mayé lu ñu lék* Fine words butter no parsnips.

This section of Matthew's gospel is sometimes referred to the Sermon on the End. It concludes with the apocalyptic description of the Second Coming and the Last Judgement. What criteria does Christ the King employ to separate the goats from the sheep? Not, as we might expect, intensity of religious faith, perfection of piety, or even adherence to the Commandments; nothing religious at all. What is most striking is that the virtuous seem surprised to be saved, and to be saved for this reason: doing good, in almost disinterestedly compassionate way. Through Matthew, Jesus plants this purely humanist message, a message that is entirely beside and impervious to any religious or supernatural argument. It is a message that both precedes and supercedes all insistence on scriptural inerrancy.

We might read this part of Matthew and miss the gospel it contains. When we see the sheep and goats being separated for all time, we might take away little more than a compassionate call for charity on behalf of the underprivileged. This makes it sound as if salvation is something we achieve. Instead, Matthew is making it clear that salvation is something we discover, often when we least expect it. The godly are surprised to discover they had been caring for the King of Creation when they simply shared themselves and their resources generously and without ulterior motive or thought of compensation.

Today, when we consider the twenty-first-century North American church, words like "power," "glory," and "triumph" are a common refrain on any given Sunday. Even as we experience general decline in all the historic, "Main Line" American churches, there is striking

growth in what are called prosperity churches, where all is “awesome” and God’s benevolence offers a new life filled with comfort, wealth, popularity and fulfilment. Church is the place to learn things that will help us achieve all of our dreams. Every Sunday is “Christ the King” Sunday and there is little need for the cross or even for community awareness, unless it be in the service of gaining converts.

But, as the proverb goes, *Xalél bañ na la mu tamm*. “The child will despise one who gives in to every demand.”

And when we look more closely at the lyrical prayer in Ephesians, a biting irony appears for those who would look to follow a faith grounded in personal achievement and success: the sovereignty of Jesus Christ may bring a new age, but it will be an age of common witness, not individual reward. The prayer is not a celebratory dance for those who have triumphed, but a wake-up call.

All Christians live both as witnesses to the gospel and as its beneficiaries. Every one of us both believes and doubts; everyone is both in need of care and called to care for; we are all subject both to judgement for our failures to support justice and to salvation by grace; we are all both goats and sheep.

Because the sovereignty of the deity over the whole cosmos is a fundamental and permanent reality, those of us who would follow Jesus are not just set adrift in a frightening world controlled by violence, greed and powermongering. We are also connected to the one who stands above these things. It would seem that salvation does not involve membership in the club of the saved; instead, it has to do with allowing ourselves to be embraced by opportunity and taking on a role in Christ’s ongoing work of reconciliation. *The invitation is in our letter box – RSVP.*

### **Hymn 653 Dear Lord and Father of mankind**

Dear Lord and Father of mankind, forgive our foolish ways!  
Reclothe us in our rightful mind, in purer lives thy service find,  
In deeper reverence, praise.



In simple trust like theirs who heard, beside the Syrian sea,  
The gracious calling of the Lord, let us, like them, without a word,  
Rise up and follow thee.

O Sabbath rest by Galilee! O calm of hills above,  
Where Jesus knelt to share with thee the silence of eternity  
Interpreted by love!

Drop thy still dews of quietness, till all our strivings cease;  
Take from our souls the strain and stress,  
And let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace.

Breathe through the heats of our desire thy coolness and thy balm;  
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;  
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,  
O still, small voice of calm.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4KnlQwzl3Y>

### **The Harvest Moon**

It is the Harvest Moon! On gilded vanes  
And roofs of villages, on woodland crests  
And their aerial neighborhoods of nests  
Deserted, on the curtained window-panes  
Of rooms where children sleep, on country lanes  
And harvest-fields, its mystic splendor rests!  
Gone are the birds that were our summer guests,  
With the last sheaves return the laboring wains!  
All things are symbols: the external shows  
Of Nature have their image in the mind,  
As flowers and fruits and falling of the leaves;  
The song-birds leave us at the summer's close,  
Only the empty nests are left behind,  
And pipings of the quail among the sheaves.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow