

Christ the King
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Colossians 1:11-20

Today we come to the end of the liturgical year: Christ the King Sunday. This ends the liturgical calendar and leads into advent in the coming weeks.

It's interesting to note that this was a late addition to the liturgical calendar in 1925. In fact, the intent of this feast was to contrast the kingship of Jesus with what Pope Pius the 11th considered to be dangerous or destructive forces vying for worldly kingship. We might imagine these, at the time, as secularism in the West, communism in Russia, fascism in Italy and Spain, and the coming Nazism soon to seize Germany.

What could possibly stand against such behemoths of human will, cruelty, and power. It's nothing less than the radically subversive kingship of Jesus Christ. And the story of how Jesus lived, how he died, and how he will reign against all other dominions and powers, rescuing his people from darkness, is the gospel. It is good news.

And it's this narrative that we see in scripture - from Old to New Testament. Our readings today in Jeremiah and Colossians tell us a lot about both who Christ is and what His kingship will look like. So, briefly, let's reflect on that a little bit.

In our reading of the letter to the Colossians, Paul is praying that they would give thanks because of what God has done. Namely, that he has qualified us for an inheritance, rescued us from the dominion of darkness, and brought us into the kingdom of his beloved son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Words like inheritance, holy people, and kingdom recon back to God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt and Pharaoh, an apt metaphor for a domain of darkness and political power wielded to enslave. The inheritance, or promised land, here is a heavenly one - a kingdom of light which breaks into the darkness and rescues those held in bondage. And we must remember, the Biblical authors and Jesus himself view evil in this world as far more than just an abstraction or just something that people do. Certainly, evil is done by people, but there's this idea in Paul that there's more to it. Scot McKnight, I think, says it well "The dominion of darkness is the deep, cosmic, demonic personal realities capturing structures and society and people in this world systematically to thwart the good plan of God." There's a temptation in a rationalistic and materialistic society to be reductive about evil, but the theology of Paul here seems to envision an even darker setting with an even grander rescue mission: Christ enters the enemy territory of spiritual and human evil to rescue the captives and transport them to freedom.

When we think of the kingdom of the beloved Son - this is what it is. Freedom from sin and evil, both in ourselves and in the world. As we read in Jeremiah, He will gather them back, restore them, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. This is a restoration of Eden, from before sin was first let loose to infect the world. Once scattered, like at Babel, we will be gathered together. Once, where there existed separation of heaven and earth, there will be unification. God and man together in paradise. Where the shepherds have failed, Jesus in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, will return as the Good Shepherd to lead and protect his people. These are the biblical pictures we're given to try and understand what, just a little bit, this might be like. But within this beautiful picture in Jeremiah, there is also a warning. There is a promise of the king who shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. And when the King returns, he will attend to those who have perpetrated evil to the flocks. The leaders are held accountable for their evil. This is the terrible and wonderful news of Christ as King: He comes to rid both us and the world of evil entirely. Let us be found in Christ rather than reckoned amongst the shepherds who harmed their flocks.

Now, once Paul has given us this bigger, cosmic picture of redemption, he transitions in verse 15 to what many scholars believe is an early Christian hymn or confession. Jesus is described as creator and reconciler of the universe, who has now ascended to his reign not only over Israel, but over all creation. Literally all things were created through the Son and he holds them all together, and the fullness of God dwells in Him. It's this kind of biblical language that led the church to establish creedal language to codify the nature of Christ - that he is fully God and fully man. The Nicene Creed, which we recite every Sunday, echoes the language of this letter in many ways in its descriptions of Jesus.

What's interesting about this is that it's not merely abstract theology. The nature of Christ is absolutely key to why he will reign as King and redeem as Messiah. The logic goes something like this in Paul's wording: First, Jesus is the beginning, which means something like he is before all things, or above all powers, or the creator source of everything. That's Jesus. Second, he's the firstborn from among the dead. Jesus was the first man to defeat death. He died, but he rose again, ushering in new creation: those who trust in Him will also be able to defeat death and rise again. And lastly, Jesus is all these things so that in everything he might have supremacy. He will take his rightful place on the throne as supreme King. Note what we learn from this: Jesus's kingship, which was his by right and nature, was obtained through an act of sacrificial love to reconcile all things through his blood. The divine purpose behind this entire narrative is one of love. This is why the nature of who Jesus is is so important. Cyril (C-ruel) of Alexandria put it this way "Christ has dominion over all creatures, a dominion not seized by violence or

usurped, but by his essence and nature. His kingship

is founded upon the hypostatic union.” It is Jesus as God and man that accomplishes salvation. The divine act of love to become a man and face death for the salvation of his people is what it means for Jesus to be King.

To zoom back out, NT Wright gives a helpful overview of what this passage is all about: “The Colossian Christians (and their modern counterparts) are to thank God, because in Jesus Christ he has revealed himself to be the one God of all the earth, the Creator and Redeemer of all. He is not one more rival (specifically, a Jewish one) to the gods of paganism. He reigns supreme over all. He has given himself to his world in loving self sacrifice, to create out of sinful humanity a people for his own possession, with the intention of eventually bringing the entire universe into a new order and harmony. All this he has done in and through Jesus, his Son, his own perfect human self expression.”

This is a big story. Christ comes to save and change each of us personally - and we become a part of this grand plan to reconcile all things to Himself. We become a new people, transformed by the love of God, who will live in a new world, transformed by the love of God. And what’s incredible is that we are offered this gift in the simplest of terms. “Repent and believe, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Turn from your participation in and worship of the evil powers and authorities of this world - instead, worship and trust in the one true God who became like a servant to redeem you, and yet will one day reign supreme and crush the head of the serpent once and for all.

This simplicity of accepting Christ - we see it in the gospel narrative of the thief on the cross. Alistair Begg has a wonderful story about this passage, where the thief wakes up in heaven and is being interviewed by an angel as to why he’s there. The angel asks him “hey man, what are you’re doing here.” And the man is like “I don’t know!” And the angel is like “what do you mean you don’t know??” And the man says “I don’t know because I don’t know”. And the angel says “hold on, let me get my supervisor.” So the angel gets his angel supervisor and they start quizzing the man on what he knows about Christianity, about doctrine. “Are you clear on the doctrine of justification by faith? How about the doctrine of scripture? etc etc. And the man is just sitting there like I don’t know what you’re talking about. So they press him and say “then on what basis should you be here.” And he responds “because the man on the middle cross said I could come.”

And I love that, because that’s the only thing any of us could ever say. It’s all because of Jesus. His life, his death, his resurrection. The king has come, and we await the fullness of what that means. So, while we live in the already but not yet

of Christ's reign as king, let us seek, by God's grace, to live and speak and act as couriers of the life giving message of Christ crucified, as we eagerly await the renewal and recreation of all things.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.