

## The Church of the Good Shepherd

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Feast of Christ the King - Revelation 1:4b-8

Turn on the news – regional, national or international – and by the end of the segment, you just might be thinking to yourself, “Oh yes, it’s good to be the king.” I’m not sure which political incident recently reminded me of that famous line Mel Brooks’ notorious movie from 1981, *The History of the World, Part I*. Does anyone remember that movie? In his parody of the historical spectacular film genre Mel Brooks plays numerous characters, one of which is King Louis XVI of France. Brooks’ rendition of King Louis is pretty vile: he’s lascivious, manipulative, and exploitative, and he gets away with it all because he wears the crown. After each despicable act, he turns to the camera and says, “It’s good to be the king,” indicating that he is fully aware of what a sweet deal he’s got.

Now, Mel Brooks’ movies are satirical parodies, not intended to be historically accurate. But satire is meant to expose the vices and abuses with the intent of shaming individuals, organizations, or society at large. While almost always humorous, satire’s greater purpose is often constructive social criticism.

We’ve all heard the aphorism, “power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” The course of human history seems to be one long narrative of individuals corrupted by power who abuse, oppress, and coerce those subject to them. This, along with our own nation’s history, is probably why we have a difficult time with kingly rule and prefer other images for our Lord and Savior than that of King. Although, this may be precisely why we need to embrace this notion of Christ as King and Ruler of creation, because to elevate anyone else only leads to trouble.

Today, the Church celebrates the feast of Christ the King. Always the last Sunday of the Christian year, it is when the church gives thanks and praise for the sovereignty of Christ, who is Lord of all creation and is coming again in glory to reign. This is a relatively new feast day in the Church, having only been instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius XI.

In his first encyclical written in the aftermath of World War I, Pius noted that while there had been a cessation of hostilities, there was no true peace and, as he wrote, “the nations of today live in a state of armed peace which is scarcely better than war itself.”<sup>1</sup> Pope Pius deplored the rise of class divisions and unbridled nationalism across Europe at that time, and held that true peace can only be found under the Kingship of Christ as “Prince of Peace”. “For,” as he wrote, “Jesus Christ reigns over the minds of individuals by His teachings, in their hearts by His love, in each one’s life by the living according to His law and the imitating of His example.”<sup>2</sup> Pius instituted the feast of Christ the King to remind Christians that their allegiance was to their spiritual ruler in heaven as opposed to earthly supremacy.

The most common depiction of Christ as King is what is called “Christ Pantocrator.” The word Pantocrator is of Greek origin meaning “Almighty” or “ruler of all,” but may also be understood as “sustainer of the world.” In iconography, Christ Pantocrator depicts Christ holding the book of the Gospels in his left hand and blessing with his right hand. As King, Christ rules over creation, blessing and sustaining it all.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Pius XI. “*Ubi arcano Dei consilio*”, December 1922

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

On this Christ the King Sunday, our lesson from Revelation does not shy away from this image of kingly power, but puts the lordship of God and Christ front and center. It's rich and hope-filled message addresses three themes: the power of the "Almighty" God who stands at the beginning and end of history, the significance of the Christ event for the church, and the consummation of God's purposes for creation. These themes are interwoven as they cannot truly be separated.

The Revelation to John is a literary hybrid – a mash-up of genres. On the one hand, it is an apocalypse, a revelation of deeper hidden truths about the future or heavenly realm as revealed in visions or dreams, providing a sharp contrast to the present corrupt age. On the other hand, John's Revelation is also presented as an epistle (or letter) addressed to seven Asian Christian congregations in prominent towns near Ephesus. Revelation follows the general epistolary structure set by Paul in his communication to the early church.

Revelation opens with the identification of the author and the intended recipients, as well as greetings of "grace and peace" from God, "the one who is and was and who is to come... and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth." The author then offers a doxological song of praise and thanksgiving, "to him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen."

The epistle then takes a decidedly apocalyptic turn, with John bidding his readers to look heavenward. As the epistle will eventually reveal, John has taken a visionary journey up into the heavenly realm and reports on all that he saw. The construction he provides is that of heaven as an unseen reality above the earth, with events taking place simultaneously with earthly history. On the earthly plane, John's community is troubled, experiencing some sort of crisis causing challenges to faith. Whether this is a crisis caused by persecution from external enemies or by internal strife, it is unclear and I will leave that to the scholars to debate. Most likely, however, it is some combination of both.

In response to this crisis, John reports on what he has seen from his visionary journey to the heavenly realm. And, there, John finds good news. While the things may look bleak for the community below, the glimpse of the heavenly realm reveals a different truth: there, the victory of the saints is already accomplished. There, the God who holds all time – past, present, and future – in the divine hand, this God reigns unquestionably. That the God Almighty – the creator of all that is, seen and unseen – rules eternally, provides reassurance and confidence to those who have fallen subject to a seemingly different history in this world.

Now, this reassurance of a hidden realm in which all is right may provide only short-lived relief from the sufferings experienced in the earthly realm. Fortunately, in John's apocalyptic vision, the parallel planes of reality eventually meet, and the King of Creation reigns in both heaven and earth. John bids his community, "Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him." What is now visible only with the eyes of faith – that Christ is King of creation, Lord of all; the Alpha and the Omega of human history – will one day be known by all and lived fully in the certain future.

But we need not wait until the end of time to obtain a foretaste of Christ's reign. In our worship, the parallel planes of reality meet and, for a moment, God's eternal time pierces our temporal time. The liturgies of praise and thanksgiving that form the worship life of the Christian community become part of the work through which God is continuing to transform the world.

To claim Christ as Almighty is a bold and politically subversive act. When we claim Christ as King, we also deny kingship to all other powers and principalities of this world. We

remind ourselves that it is Christ who rules our hearts, minds, and lives. And that, all appearances to the contrary, no earthly power has ultimate power over us – Christ’s beloved. The God who not only is the ruler of history but is actively working within history for the transformation of the world.

Next week will be the beginning of the Church’s new year, as we celebrate the first Sunday of Advent. Advent may be one of my most favorite seasons of sacred time, as we prepare and wait, expectant with hope, for the incarnation of Christ in the world. But before all of that, on this Christ the King Sunday, we are invited to remember that all time and all of creation is held and sustained in his divine hand. Through Jesus Christ, we are to live as both members of a “kingdom” under his authority, and as a holy people, “priests serving his God and Father.” And we are invited today to re-member the Body of Christ and celebrate in the reign of the King of Creation and the sustainer and reconciler of all. Thanks be to God!

Amen.