

Christ the King Sunday

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Matthew 25:31-46; Ephesians 1:15-23

Christ the King Sunday is traditionally the final Sunday of Ordinary Time and the closing Sunday of the Christian Year (the calendar of the Christian Year begins with the First Sunday of Advent which is the Sunday closest to November 30 and runs through Christ the King Sunday – the third Sunday of November). Thus, the celebration of the liturgical year ends as it begins – with the celebration of Jesus as the king of heaven and earth!

The traditional emphasis for Christ the King Sunday is upon the all-embracing authority of Jesus that leads humanity to seek the “peace of Christ” by embracing and living out in human society the “kingdom of God”. That emphasis is magnificently captured in this Sunday’s scripture selections that are amazingly perceptive and penetrating in their social analysis.

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24: Except for a fixation on the parable of the “Dry Bones” (Ezek. 37), Protestant Christianity has almost ignored the remainder of the book of Ezekiel, probably because of its outsized imagery and symbolism. But the church ignores Ezekiel to its own hurt. In prophecy after prophecy, Ezekiel probably represents the most penetrating and nuanced social analysis that appears anywhere in scripture. Such is true of the Old Testament lesson for today’s lectionary.

“The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Ah you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep” (Ezek. 34:1-2)? The metaphor of Israel as “sheep” and Israel’s political, economic and religious leaders as “shepherds” is a metaphor used throughout scripture (e.g., Num. 27:16-17; I Kings 22:17). Ezek. 34:1-10 is an indictment brought against Israel’s aristocracy for using their power, wealth and influence to oppress, exploit and control the people rather than caring for and nurturing them. The systems of Israel have used their position and power for their own benefit, and not for the good of the people. To the contrary, they have used that power to exploit the people and to take advantage of them at every turn. Thus God brings judgment upon Israel’s kings, religious leaders and the wealthy. “Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them” (vs. 10).

But God will do more than hold the systems accountable for their victimization of the people. “For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. 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. I will feed with justice” (excerpted from vss. 11-16).

Yahweh will search out the scattered sheep (it is intriguing to note the words used by Ezekiel for God’s actions toward a wasted Israel: “searching”, “rescuing”, “gathering”, “feeding”, “healing”, “nurturing”). Yahweh will restore public justice (vss. 11-16). He will do so by

punishing the ruling class for taking advantage of, brutalizing and scattering the flock (vss. 17-22).

But God will do more than that. In one of Ezekiel's most brilliant analyses, he states that God will also sort out from Israel the "rams and male goats" who have "pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns" (vs. 21). In other words, it is not simply the rich, the powerful and the priestly who have taken advantage of the people. The people have taken advantage of each other. "We have met the enemy and he is *us!*" In a reprise of 22:29-30, Ezekiel notes that people who were just a little higher on the economic, social or religious scale but were not among the elite had imitated the elite, and had themselves taken advantage of those weaker than themselves. Even "animals" within the "herd" had started "bullying" others below them, so that middle classes were bullying lower classes. That was how insidiously the evil of the "shepherds" had entered all of public life, in that it had gotten the people to turn against each other as they aped the values the power elite were practicing!

What will be the initiative that God will take on behalf of victim Israel that has turned them into scattered sheep? Verses 23-31 lay out that initiative. A Davidic figure will emerge who will be both servant and prince, and who will bring about the liberation of the people (see 37:24-28; Jer. 23:5; 30:8-10; 33:17-26; Isa. 9:6-7; Hos. 3:5; Amos 9:11; II Sam. 7:8; I Kings 11:34). Israel's transformation will occur through God's intervention and God's intervention alone – not through their own revolutionary activity. And that transformation will happen through the life, ministry, work and intervention of God's servant, "David" (vss. 23-24).

The result of "David's" intervention will be the creation of a new kingdom – the kingdom of God – the kingdom of shalom. "I will make with them a covenant of shalom. I will send down the showers in their seasons; they shall be showers of blessing. They shall be secure on their soil; and they shall know that I am the Lord, when I break the bars of their yoke, and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them. They shall live in safety, and no one shall make them afraid. They shall know that I, the Lord their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord God" (vss. 25-31). And all this will happen because of the intervention and liberation of Yahweh's servant, the coming princely David.

Psalm 100 is one of the classic hymns of praise in the Psalter. It calls upon Israel (and ourselves, both as individuals and as a community, to) "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.

"Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people and the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations" (100:1-5).

There are three striking dimensions of this hymn. First, it continues the "sheep" theme of Ezekiel. In the parallel construction of the psalm which celebrates God as creator, the Psalm declares "we are his people and the sheep of his pasture". Thus, the psalm reminds us that we humans belong ultimately to God; we may be "sheep" – but we are *His* sheep!

Second, the Psalm is a hymn to individual Israelites (and Christians) to center their lives in Yahweh. Center your life in Yahweh, the Psalm is telling us. Worship and praise Him alone. For He is your creator, protector and the One who loves you. That love is steadfast, faithful, never wavering. It is “his steadfast love” (Hebrew: *chesedh* love). And He will never forsake or give up on you. So you should never forsake or give up on Him!

Third, although the Psalm is almost exclusively read as a worship hymn focused on individuals, it has a very strong corporate nature, as well. It opens with a call to “*all the earth*” to make a joyful noise to the Lord – not just individuals praising Him. It speaks of our response as being in the plural (“us”, “we”), not in the singular and calls us by the plural “people”. Thus, the author wishes to remind us that we are not a person unless we are a people, for true spirituality is always a summons to community. So it is that we may very much be “sheep”, easily confused, uncertain of our goals and not terribly bright! But the Lord is our supreme shepherd, who cares for, loves and will use us to enable his shalom community to come in its entirety someday upon the earth!

Matthew 25:31-46 is, in my opinion, the most important parable in the Gospel of Matthew, comparable to the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son in the Gospel of Luke. We can make that judgment both because of its position in Matthew’s story and because of the way this parable summarizes Jesus’ entire message in that Gospel.

In position, this parable is the final parable (and therefore the climax) in the pericope of parables on “faithfulness” (24:45-25:46). It is the final parable of all the parable pericopes throughout the Gospel of Matthew. And finally and most importantly, it is the final parable spoken by Jesus in the entire Gospel account. Following the Hebrew principle of the last in order being the first in importance, this parable becomes the interpretive parable *par excellence* of the Gospel of Matthew. This is the final teaching that Jesus wants imprinted on the minds, hearts and in the consciousness of his listeners, the apex teaching he doesn’t want them ever to forget! This parable is the teaching that, above all, Jesus wants every believer to take to his heart and every church never to forget! This is the Gospel of Matthew summarized, even personified! What is the teaching with which Jesus wants to leave us?

“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’” (vss. 34-40).

Then follows an equally lyrical passage of almost identical construction concerning the goats who must come for judgment, for “you did not do it to one of the least of these, (and therefore) you did not do it to me” (vs. 45).

The parable begins with a clear definition of roles. “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” (vss. 31-32). The “Son of Man” (vs. 31) is also referred to in this parable as the “king” (vs. 34) and the “Lord” (vs. 37). Indisputably, this is Jesus because the “Son of Man” is the term he uses of himself throughout the Gospel of Matthew (in fact, 28 times), so it is intriguing that he uses as synonyms for himself the titles of “king” and “Lord”. “The nations” (vs. 32) is meant to refer to the whole inhabited world that is gathered for judgment by the new “David” (Isa. 2:1, 4; 66:18, Joel 3). Picking up on Ezekiel’s use of the word, “sheep” are meant to refer to God’s chosen people (e.g, Ps. 100; Matt. 9:36; 10:16). “Goats” are those to be rejected, their judgment being eternal separation from God (13:12, 24-30, 47-50).

What is most significant about this parable, however, is not the roles played by specific characters (although it helps us to understand the parable better by identifying the players of the roles). What is most significant about this parable is its profoundly clear and even lyrical statement about what God expects out of God’s people!

There are three primary ways of interpreting this parable. All of these interpretations are legitimate. Each interpretation nuances the parable in a way that, all considered together, creates a world-enveloping message. And each – and then all, considered together – enables us to understand what Jesus expects out of God’s people, wherever they may be in the world and however they might manifest themselves.

The first interpretation is an internal insight. That is, a particular community of God’s people is ultimately judged by their actions toward those in their midst who are most hurting. The phrase from the parable that enables this interpretation to occur is the key phrase, “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” (vs. 40, and conversely, vs. 45). The attention for this interpretation is centered on Jesus’ words, “who are members of my family” (a better translation is “my brothers [and sisters”, implied]). That is, what Jesus was saying was that the true integrity of God’s people is found in how they treat “the least of these” brother and sisters who are also part of that same community.

“The least of these” was the popular term in Israel used for “the expendables” – those people who were at the economic bottom of Jewish culture and had been ostracized from Israelite life as unclean. These were the lepers, the beggars, the orphans and widows, the shepherds, the impoverished who were no longer able to compete for even scraps in the Israelite economy. Such people were not only economically rejected; they were religiously shunned (“unclean”) and politically unrepresented. No decent Jew – whether he was a wealthy nobleman, a priest or even a peasant, would have anything to do with such people. And here Jesus is saying that the way to

understand whether a particular manifestation of the people of God (i.e., a given synagogue) is truly a part of God's people is to ask how they treat the expendables in their village (since there was only one synagogue for every village). This was Jesus' definition of authentic faith (see Micah 6:8).

The second interpretation concentrates upon the same statement, but it changes somewhat its focus. Rather than concentrating upon "the least of these *brothers and sisters of mine*", as does the first interpretation, the second places its emphasis upon *the least of these*". This interpretation recognizes an inherent limitation in the first interpretation, and seeks to correct it. The danger of the first interpretation is that, while true, it can lead to parochialism. That is, one could read this parable in a way that would allow it to declare that the mark of the authentic congregation was whether it cared for "the expendables" in its synagogue. But Jesus wasn't thinking in terms of simply the expendables who are faithful participants in the life of a congregation. It is not suggesting that the only hurting people the church should care about are the hurting people who are members of that church (as I have heard some advocate). By definition, the village synagogue was the synagogue for all the people – not just those faithful in their attendance and participation. Therefore, they should be concerned for all the expendables who might move through the life of their village – residents of the village who have fallen on hard times, itinerating beggars who might come from another village or area, even Gentiles who might be hurting. The final test of the authenticity of the people of God is their action toward all the expendables in the world – both near and far. God's people exist for "the least of these" – and for no other purpose. If a people are truly to be honoring to God, then they will not worship God by keeping all the minutia of the Law (as did the Pharisees), or observe all the proper liturgies and rituals of worship (as did the priests and Sadducees). Rather, the authentic worship of God will be the service of humanity. And that portion of humanity upon whom the authentic people of God should be centered are the expendables of that society – the poor, the powerless, the marginalized, the rejected, the abandoned. God's truly authentic people are those who give their lives away in working for the transformation of the plight of the poor and the empowerment of the poor.

But there is a third way of interpreting this parable. This is the most powerful – and even mind-boggling – interpretation. And this is the interpretation that most conforms and confirms the primary emphasis that moves throughout the entirety of the Gospel of Matthew. This interpretation centers upon the judgment given upon those identified as "sheep" and "goats".

Who are the sheep and goats? Our automatic assumption is that it is people. But take a more careful look at the text. It begins, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. And all the *nations* will be gathered before him, and he will separate *them* one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (vss. 31-32).

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible does injustice to this passage by translating it, "and he will separate people one from another". That makes it sound like only individuals are being judged at this last judgment. But that is to miss the whole point of what Jesus was seeking to say. Even a translation of "the people" would have been better than "people". The preferred English translation, in almost every other instance is "he will separate *them*" (meaning "the nations"). Only this translation makes clear the point that Jesus is making here.

All will be judged! All individuals, all churches, all mosques, all synagogues, all temples, all villages and cities, all economies, all nations – everything and everyone will ultimately be judged by God! And this includes Christians as well as non-Christians, Jews as well as non-Jews. The Greek words used here, *panta ta ethne* (“all the nations”) can be translated no other way. Absolutely everybody and everything will someday be judged by God.¹ And how will they be judged?

Every nation will be judged by God as to how it treats its poor! The military might of a nation means nothing to God. The economic prowess of a nation is given to it by God only to assertively seek the removal of its people’s poverty and the poverty of the world. God doesn’t bless the nation whose politicians most talk about God or their religious faith. God could care less whether that nation and its politicians conform to that nation’s Constitution! The only real question put to *every* nation is “What have you done with your poor?” The only sign of a nation’s faithfulness and obedience to God is how intentionally they have organized their life together to eliminate poverty and to rid their nation of racism, sexism and marginalization of any peoples. The true spirituality of a nation is revealed, not by how much their leaders declare “Lord, Lord”, but what the disparity of that nation is between their richest citizens and their poorest peoples. For there is no place in God’s world for any nation that has not freed all its people from being expendable. That is each nation’s single responsibility and reason for its existence. And if it has not accomplished the elimination of poverty and the unequal treatment of its citizens, then it must be judged by God and be cast “into eternal punishment”. That is why all nations ultimately crumble!

And what is true of nations is true of any group within that nation – whether Christian or not. Every unit of government, every city and village, every business and industry, every club, school or religious institution and – ultimately – every individual is measured by the same criteria. What have you done with “the least of these, your brothers and sisters”? That is the great judgment God brings upon all the “peoples” of the earth.

But what about Christians? Are not Christians “saved by grace”, not needing good works in order to be saved? What Jesus’ final teaching in Matthew seeks to impress upon us is that, whether one’s nation is found among the righteous sheep or the judged goats, whether one’s church is found among the sheep or the goats, whether one’s self is found among the righteous or the judged depends upon how each has treated Jesus “in the distressing disguise of the poor” (to quote Mother Theresa). One receives Christ by faith. But the way you can discern whether one is truly a “Christ-one” is whether he acts like a “Christ-one”. It is through one’s deeds of mercy, compassion and concrete working for justice that one’s response to Christ as savior and Lord is manifested. The righteous sheep participate in the establishing of God’s kingdom by working for that alternative kingdom, seeking the political, economic, social and spiritual transformation of society. Their actions manifest God’s kingdom in a sinful world (Isa. 58:6-7).

The entire theme of the book of Matthew is that Jesus is the Messiah, the “Son of David” of Ezekiel 34. But because of the commitment of Israel’s leadership to greed, control and the lust for power, Jesus is presented by Matthew as the *marginalized* Messiah. Jesus is one of “the

¹ Cf. F. Dale Bruner, *The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 565-567.

expendables”! In fact, Jesus is the archetype of the expendables of the world. And as the one who is “The Expendable”, the one who has been marginalized by Israel’s and Rome’s political, economic and religious elite, Jesus identifies with the poor, the marginalized, the vulnerable and the desperate. Therefore, Jesus calls his followers to the very same living out of the gospel. Jesus’ disciples are to live lives of working for justice, for empowerment of the people and of service among the marginalized nobodies of the world, working against the “shepherds” (Ez. 34:1-7) and their systems and for the poor and powerless. That is what it means to be an authentic follower of Christ. That is the follower who will be rewarded in the final judgment. And that is true because the authentic disciple keeps on ministering to the “expendable” Jesus “in the distressing disguise of the poor”!

Ephesians 1:15-23 is one of the most profound testimonies to “Christ the King” in scripture. Ezekiel describes the Messiah or Christ as a Davidic monarch who empowers his exploited sheep. The psalmist reminds us in Psalm 100 that we may be confused and uncertain sheep, but our God is the one who cares for us and uses us to enable his shalom community to come someday upon the earth. In our Gospel Lesson, Jesus describes the sheep as the church itself, seeking to imitate Jesus in bringing liberation and transformation to the poor, marginalized and disadvantaged of the world. The passages decry the “shepherds” for their commitment to building their own power, wealth and domination that result in the oppression, exploitation and control of the people. Now, in Ephesians 1:15-23, the lectionary reaches its clearest statement of Christ as the liberating king.

In the earlier part of chapter one of Ephesians, Paul has described Christians as being blessed (1:3), chosen (vs. 4), adopted (vs. 5), redeemed and forgiven (vs. 7), aware of God’s call upon their lives (vs. 9), and marked with the Holy Spirit (vs. 13). But for what purpose are Christians so chosen, called and redeemed by Christ? Given who they are and have been chosen to be in Christ, Paul tells the Christians that he prays that “the eyes of your heart (may be) enlightened, so that 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 power for us who believe” (vss. 18-19). In other words, Paul is praying that the Christians will perceive how power is actually distributed in the world by God: (rather than to believe the “lies” that have been told them by Rome and the Jewish elite), so that they will join with Christ in the transformation of the world. They are to understand God’s power given to them so that they will use that power in the cause of Christ and Christ’s Kingdom. But to do so, they must first understand who Christ actually is.

“God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at the 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” (1:20-23).

To understand what Paul is writing about Jesus in this passage, one must understand the cosmology under which the ancient world (including Paul) operated. They believed that the spirit world and the physical world were closely intertwined, with activities and actions

occurring in the spirit world inevitably impacting what happened in the physical world – and vice versa. Therefore, when Paul would speak of “rule and authority and power and dominion”, he meant at one and the same time, both the angelic/demonic and their physical manifestation in the political, economic and religious structures of society. Thus, Paul was describing *simultaneously* the systems of both heaven/hell and earth when he wrote of:

Rule (or “throne”) – the symbolic institution of power in a state, city, economic or religious institution, whether in heaven, hell or earth;

Authority – the specific person who currently maintains that rule or occupies that “throne” (princes can change; thrones and ruling continue);

Power – the sanctions or rules that legitimize the ruler’s or throne’s rule and authority over that dominion and the ruler’s rights, privileges and limitations in maintaining that rule and occupying that throne;

Dominion – the sphere of influence or territory ruled by that throne (thus, Caesar’s “dominion” was the Roman Empire; the Jewish high priest’s “dominion” was wherever the Jewish religion was followed).

What did Paul have in mind when he referred to ‘rule, authority, power and dominion’? Was he describing a spiritual warfare between God and the forces of Satan, or was he describing the struggle between political, economic and religious systems within a nation or between nations here on earth? In reality, Paul meant both simultaneously. Paul, like every other person in the ancient world, believed that every political, economic or religious struggle here on earth was a manifestation of a struggle over control of the world between the forces of God and the forces of Satan. And every spiritual struggle “in the heavenlies” was manifested in struggle here on earth.

Why are we taking the time here to explore the ancient world’s cosmology? Simply because to do so helps us to understand the profound insight Paul is presenting in today’s Epistle lectionary on “Christ the King”, an insight that directly impacts the Gospel and Old Testament lectionaries, as well.

Paul actually says three things here. First, he declares that God “raised (Jesus) from the dead and seated him at (God’s) 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” (1:20-21).

Let’s unpack this extremely dense statement. He tells us that God raised Jesus from the dead. By doing so, what Paul is arguing is that Christ’s power over the systems began with that initial act that signaled God’s power over the systems and God’s capability to set history. Rome and the Jewish clerical elite could put Jesus to death – ***but they couldn’t keep him dead!*** God would set aside the physical laws of death and raise Christ from the dead. Thus, God can do with the systems whatever God chooses to do.

Paul then goes on to declare, “and seated (Christ) at his right hand in the heavenly places”. Here, Paul is declaring that Christ’s ascension into heaven was the indication that God had now made Jesus the monarch of heaven. This is a rather common theme in the New Testament, taught not only by Paul, but by Peter, John and the author of Hebrews as well (Rom. 8:34; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3-4; 10:12-13; 12:2; I Pet. 3:21-22; Rev. 1: 17—2:1).

In this passage, the statement, “seated at his right hand” is particularly significant. To be seated at the right hand of a monarch was not simply the highest place of honor. It was the seat that only the heir apparent to the crown could occupy. It was the seat of the “prince”, the vice-regent. Therefore, to say that Jesus was sitting at the right hand of God was to say to people at that time, “Jesus is God’s selected ruler of heaven – right now!”

The passage continues, “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion”. What Paul is declaring here is that Jesus, as monarch of heaven, now rules not only over heaven but over every political, economic and religious system on earth (since all ancient peoples believed in the indissoluble relationship between all things spiritual and all things physical).

Paul then concludes this sentence, “above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come”. In Hebrew culture, the name described the essence of the person, organization or nation. The name “Jesus” meant “God saves”. So when Paul states that “God saves” is seated on the throne of heaven, heir apparent to that throne, and is there for now and for all eternity, he is saying that this Jesus is now monarch of both heaven and of all the nations of the world for eternity.

Second, Paul then writes, “And he has put all things under his feet” (vs. 22a). A meaningless expression for us today, this was a highly volatile statement in first-century Rome. The term, “he has put all things under his feet” could mean only one thing to anyone living in the Roman Empire. “He has put him under his feet” was a Roman expression used of the Caesar’s act of domination over a defeated monarch. Literally, Caesar placed his foot on the prone defeated monarch’s neck, making him swear fealty to Caesar and to Rome. Thus, Paul, in using this term, is declaring that the true emperor of Rome is Jesus who has placed the “false Caesar” – the Roman emperor “under his feet” in subjugation.

Third, Paul concludes “And God has made Christ the head over all things for the church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (vss. 22b-23). Up until this point, Paul has been talking about Jesus’ monarchy or rule both over heaven and all political and economic systems on earth. But now he takes it a step further to include the religious system – that which gives purpose, direction and meaning to human society. What does Paul say about Christ’s lordship over religion? He states that Christ has also been made head of the church (thus the religious system). As Christ’s body, then, the church is to carry out Christ’s claims upon all the world’s systems. We are thus to move into society to work to bring to reality what has already been accomplished in heaven. For that to occur is to bring about “the fullness of him who fills all in all”.

What Paul has written here in Ephesians 1:20-23 is an extremely political statement! Keeping in mind the cosmology to which Paul and all other Jews and Gentiles held – that earth and heaven

are so linked that an action in heaven would occur before it occurred on earth but which would inevitably, relentlessly happen on earth – what Paul is saying is that *Christ has already been crowned monarch over all nations, economic orders, religions and civilizations that do now or will eventually exist!* In other words, Paul is here declaring that *Jesus is the true Caesar of the world*, and the one who claims to be Caesar – in this case, Nero – is an imposter!

This, of course, is an extremely radical concept that Paul is espousing here – in fact, the kind of conviction that would be considered treason by Rome and consequently worthy of death! From Rome’s perspective, this is extremely revolutionary talk that strikes at the heart of the very legitimacy of the Roman Empire.

It is very important to understand how radical Christianity was in its first century. It wasn’t more liberal than other philosophies. Nor was it simply revolutionary. It was extremely radical – and this statement by Paul illustrates how radical it actually was.

The difference between being liberal and being radical is important. Being liberal means being open-minded or generous, especially toward those who are not as economically or politically fortunate as you are. Liberalism assumes that the liberals are holding the primary power, but because they are so open-minded and generous, they are willing to share some of the benefits of that power. The premise of liberalism, however, is that the primary power remains in the hands of those choosing to share it and only enough benefits are shared to better the living standards of the lower class while not sacrificing any of the power of those who wield that power.

The difference between being revolutionary and being radical is equally important. Being revolutionary and being liberal are the exact opposite of each other. Liberals hold onto their power but in their largess choose to share some of its benefits while not surrendering any of the power. Revolutionaries consist of the powerless that build sufficient political or military power that they are successful in overthrowing the liberals (and conservatives).

Because revolutionaries overthrow the established order, they are often seen as being radical. But, in reality, they are reactionary. The reason why is that power is perceived in the same way by both liberals and by revolutionaries. Power is perceived as the exercising of might – whether that is military might, political might or economic might. And its operating premise is “might makes right”. Therefore, the oppressed, rising up to overthrow the oppressor, always become the new oppressors. That is why revolution is not a radical response, but a reactionary response. And that is why revolution is always bound to fail.

First century Christianity was neither liberal (i.e., compassionate) nor revolutionary (i.e., seeking the violent overthrow of Rome). It was instead, radical (from the Latin word *radix*, which means getting to the “root”). Neither a generous Caesar who provides “bread and circuses” for the people nor a contra-Caesar who seeks to overthrow Caesar and replace him with a new despotism is the answer. What Paul is presenting here is a radical response – a Caesar who is Jesus who acts out an entirely different kind of power – relational power – power that is built around not being a tyrant but being a servant (Mark 10:42-45) – power which has as its purpose sharing, building mutual power, building reciprocity – power that is built upon the relationships one has carefully built with others that seeks the good of the other as well as one’s own self.

That is the radicalism Paul is presenting here when he declares that Jesus is the authentic Caesar of Rome and of all nations and peoples!

Thus, what is hinted at in Ezekiel 34 and Psalm 100 and is spelled out in compassionate action in Matthew 25 is taught as a new political and theological understanding of power in this passage. Paul teaches in Ephesians 1:20-23 that Jesus has been crowned by God as the true Caesar of all the nations, all the political, economic and religious systems, and all the people of the world (even though they may not acknowledge his rule). He is ruling them with a new power – a relational power – the power of love. And because Jesus is the true Caesar of all the earth and of heaven, then the job of the church is to work as God’s hands and feet in society, seeking to bring about the submission of the systems of every nation and economy to Christ by actively involving itself in working for justice in the public arena. *That* is what this Sunday – Christ the King Sunday – should be celebrating!

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