

Christ the King Sunday

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 1:68-79; Luke 23:33-43; Colossians 1:11-20

This Sunday is **Christ the King Sunday** – the final Sunday of this Christian Year. To conclude each Christian Year within the Protestant and Anglican traditions, the lectionary embraces the authority and rulership of Christ, not simply over the individual lives of those who embrace him as savior, but his authority, power, dominion and influence over all the world and the world's systems. It is that Sunday of the Year that we are reminded that life is not about us! It is about Christ and His Kingdom!

Jeremiah 23:1-6 is a passage with some very intriguing nuances in it in its original Hebrew. It is that prophet's comparison of King Zedekiah with the coming of the "righteous Branch (who will) reign as king and deal wisely and shall exercise justice and righteousness in the land" (23:5). To really appreciate the insights of this scripture, one needs to review the immediate history of Judah surrounding its writing.

Jehoikim, king of Judah (reigned 609-598) was on the throne. His father, Josiah, had been killed in 609 in a battle against Egypt when that empire's army was on the march to war against the Babylonian empire. Although Egypt lost the war with Babylon, Palestine and Syria had been brought under Egypt's control. Josiah's successor, Jehoikim, sought to salvage some degree of independence for Judah by paying tribute to Egypt as a vassal. But in 605-602, the Babylonian army under Nebuchadrezzar invaded Syria and Palestine and took it away from Egypt. Jehoikim, seeing the handwriting on the wall, switched allegiance to Babylon and agreed for Judah to become one of their vassal states. But he was a most unwilling vassal, simply biding his time until opportunity would allow him to return under Egypt's hegemony. That opportunity came in 601, when the armies of Babylonia and Egypt battled to a draw, and Babylonia's power over Palestine weakened. But this was a fatal mistake for Jehoikim. In 598, the Babylonian army marched on Judah, and Jehoikim suddenly died (it is supposed that he was assassinated by his fellow Jews who hoped that his death would save Judah from destruction; cf. Jer. 22:18; 36:30). Jehoikim's eighteen-year-old son, Jehoiachin, was placed on the throne but reigned in Jerusalem only three months until the conquering Nebuchadrezzar placed Jehoiachin's uncle, Mattaniah, on the throne, and Jehoiachin was taken into exile. Mattaniah took the name Zedekiah as his throne name.

Zedekiah was Judah's last ruler, reigning from 597 to 587 BCE. He was not an effective ruler. Although apparently well intentioned (cf. Jer. 37:17; 38:7-28), he did not have the internal fortitude to stand up to his nobles (Jer. 38:5) and was fearful of popular opinion (38:19). That popular opinion was both rebellious against Babylonian dominance and promoted Jehoiachin as the legitimate ruler, even though he was in exile (Jer., ch. 27; Ezekiel 11:14, 33:24). The fact that it was Babylon that had removed Jehoiachin from his throne and who placed Zedekiah there in his stead only added to the anger of those who contended that Zedekiah was an illegitimate ruler.

The nobles and priests remaining in Jerusalem finally won the day, pressuring Zedekiah to declare Judah's independence from Babylon. The empire struck back in 588, conquering all but

Jerusalem, placing the city under siege, and finally taking the city in 587 BCE. Zedekiah was removed from the throne, the position of king abolished by Babylonia, the city of Jerusalem destroyed, the Temple leveled, and the nation annexed to the Babylonian empire. Zedekiah was forced to watch the execution of his three sons (so that there were no longer any legitimate heirs to the throne), was then blinded and taken in chains to Babylon where he soon died (II Kings 25:6; Jer. 52:9-11). The nations of Israel and Judah were no more!

The Old Testament lesson for Christ the King Sunday (Jer. 23:1-6) was written by Jeremiah after Zedekiah had ascended the throne in 597 and before the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. His basic message is that the kings of Israel (and most notably, Jehoikim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah) are the “shepherds” of Israel, responsible for caring for their Jewish “flock”. Instead, their policies have led to “destroying and scattering the sheep of (God’s) pasture”. Their foreign policy of opposing Babylon and siding with Egypt has led to their repeated defeat as a nation and their people being taken into Babylonian exile. Thus, Judah’s leadership – and especially its kings – are responsible for the nation’s fall.

This attack against the monarchy is consistent with Jeremiah’s message throughout his book. Jeremiah contended that the Davidic monarchy (of which Jehoikim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah were all descendants) had been given the obligation under God of establishing and maintaining justice throughout the nation – but particularly in defending the rights of those who were most economically and politically vulnerable in that society (the “widows, orphans and aliens”). If they were faithful in their discharge of that obligation, then both they and their nation would be blessed by God. But if they did not – but rather acted to build their own power, wealth and domination at the people’s expense, they would be under the judgment of God and, eventually, the people.

This argument is enriched by an intriguing wordplay in today’s Old Testament lesson around the Hebrew word, *pqd*. Jeremiah (who was famous for wordplays) states accusingly to Israel’s political system, “It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord” (vs. 2). Later on, Jeremiah writes, “I will raise up shepherds over Judah who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord” (vs. 4). It is the Hebrew word, *pqd*, used in verse two for “attended” and “attend” and in verse four for “be missing”. What Jeremiah is saying is that the kings have not “looked after” or “cared for” the people, and therefore they will be “looked after” by God (having the sense of “called to account” or “punished”). But whereas those who lead Israel’s political, economic and religious systems will be “called to account” and “punished” for their abandonment and even manipulation of the people for the system’s own ends, God will “shepherd” the people so that they will be “looked after”, “mustered”, “counted”, and therefore not “missing”. Thus, by this wordplay, Jeremiah makes it clear that whereas Israel’s political, economic and religious leaders are now illegitimate because they have been unfaithful to the exercise of their office given them by God, their legitimate king, Yahweh will be faithful to the people, providing them with the kind of political, economic and spiritual care that will enable them “to have a future and a hope” (Jer. 29:11).

Since the nation's leaders will only end up betraying the people and not practicing God's justice, what will God do to redeem the situation? Jeremiah states two things. First, he promises that God will raise up legitimate leaders to "shepherd (my people), and they shall not fear any longer or be dismayed" (vs. 4). God will replace illegitimate leaders (like Zedekiah) with legitimate leaders (not Jehoiachin as some were claiming, but leaders unnamed). And God will do this through God's second action.

"The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is righteousness'" (vss. 5-6).

God's primary action will be to raise up "a righteous Branch" of the lineage of David. Because he will be that "righteous Branch", he will "reign as king and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land". With his reign, Judah and Israel will live again as one nation, and will live in security. The name of this "righteous Branch" will be "the Lord is righteousness".

The promised king will be the "righteous Branch" or the "true Shoot". Likening the Davidic lineage to a flourishing tree, Jeremiah is insisting that the authentic "branch" or "limb" of that tree will not be Zedekiah or Jehoiachin (who was still alive, but in Babylonian captivity), but will be this still un-named person. Judah was torn asunder with the argument as to whether it was Zedekiah or Jehoiachin who was the legitimate Davidic ruler of Israel. Jeremiah is responding that neither of them are the legitimate successor to David; only the "righteous Branch" is. It is Judah's task to recognize that Branch and commit to following him -- and not the destructive or self-serving policies of either Jehoiachin or Zedekiah.

Then Jeremiah names the "righteous Branch". His name is "the Lord is righteousness". The English translation is a literal transliteration of the name, but it doesn't capture the subtlety of the Hebrew. This is perhaps Jeremiah's most profound wordplay. The name of the "righteous Branch" is "Yahweh-sidqenu" or "Sidqenu". It is meant as an intentional wordplay on Zedekiah's name, which in Hebrew is "Sidqiyahu". His name is "Sidqenu" and not "Sidqiyahu". His name is not "Zedekiah", which means "God our might". Rather, his name is "God our righteousness" or "God our justice" (the Hebrew concept of "justice" and "righteousness" being identical as the commitment to defending the rights of society's marginalized and oppressed).

So, who is the true and authentic Davidic king of Israel? It is the One chosen by God whose primary commitment is to the poor, the powerless, the oppressed of the world! This is the one we celebrate on Christ the King Sunday.

Luke 1:68-79 is the "psalm" for Christ the King Sunday, even though it does not appear in the Psalter. It is the magnificent hymn of the father of John the Baptizer, Zechariah, on the occasion of the birth of John.

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke

through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:68-79). Jeremiah’s prophecy is being enacted right before our eyes!

Although one would think that Zechariah would start with his son (John the Baptizer), instead he begins with Jesus. The coming of John was for the purpose of announcing God’s coming action through Jesus, and therefore it is Jesus who is the center of Zechariah’s prophecy, not his son! It was not about John!

Zechariah’s Song has become one of the standard liturgies of the church, called “*The Benedictus*” (because it begins, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel”). The hymn is set in a psalm mode which, by its very nature, blesses and glorifies God. It is a commentary of the extraordinary events that have taken place over these few months – the announcement that God is on the move in the miraculous conceptions that have occurred in both Elizabeth and Mary, the birth of Zechariah’s son who is destined to be a great prophet of God and forerunner (and foreteller) of the coming of God’s “messenger of the covenant”, and the weaving of both John’s story and Jesus’ story into one tapestry of redemption. Zechariah begins with that tapestry of redemption.

God’s action is “to raise up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David” (vs. 69). That was the principle objective of God’s amazing action over the previous months. John is simply a key player in the acting of God’s will, but he is not that savior. The coming of that person who would liberate God’s people around the world was prophesied by God’s prophets over hundreds of years (vs. 70). The salvation that person will accomplish is comprehensive in its scope. It would be for humanity’s “redemption” (vs. 68). But it would also be so that “we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us” (vs. 71). It would “show mercy” upon us but would also return God’s people to “(Abraham’s) holy covenant (with God)” (vs. 72), so that Israel, “being rescued from the hands of (its) enemies” will be able to live as a nation “in holiness and righteousness before (God) all our days” (vs. 73). The emphasis in Zechariah’s psalm of both individual and corporate salvation, of both spiritual redemption and political and economic liberation is both marked and obvious! To Luke, salvation was far more than the redeeming of souls!

And what is John’s role in all this? “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord (i.e., Jesus) to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people through the forgiveness of their sins” (vss. 76-77). Whereas Jesus is the Son of God Most High (vv. 32, 35), John is to be the Prophet of God Most High! His task is a single task: “to prepare the way for Jesus” (vs. 76b). And John is to “prepare the way for Jesus”

through two actions. First, he is to announce the coming of Jesus, to center the focus on “the messenger of the covenant” and not on “my messenger” and therefore, to create a sense of eager anticipation among God’s people. Second, he is to prepare people to be open and ready to receive the message, ministry and call to them by Jesus by the act of “the forgiveness of their sins” (vs. 77c). The ritual of water baptism was to be the means John would use to enable God’s people to become reflective of their own greed, lust for power and compulsion to dominate and control so that they would repent of such sin and thus become most receptive to the work that Jesus was to accomplish as “the messenger of the covenant”. If the people were indeed open and receptive enough, Jesus would then be able to “give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death and to guide their feet into the way of shalom” (vs. 79)! For that “shalom community” awaiting those willing to be so guided would be a nation and a people committed to the building of their life together as a community of justice, equitable distribution of wealth, the elimination of poverty and lives lived knitted together in God – the very definition of the Hebrew word, “shalom”!

Luke 23:33-43 is a most intriguing selection for Christ the King Sunday, for, although it is dealing with the execution of Jesus, this Gospel lesson is a profound affirmation of both his royal status and his essential role as Savior of the world.

The affirmation of Jesus as royal Savior occurs in three ways in today’s Gospel lesson. First, it occurs through the mockery of Jesus delivered by three peoples in diminishing order – Israel’s leaders (the religious/political/economic “powers” of Israel who rule on Rome’s behalf), the Roman soldiers and one of the executed criminals. In order, they rebuke Jesus, as follows. Israel’s leaders scoff, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, the chosen one” (vs. 35). The soldiers mock Jesus, saying “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself” (vs. 36). And the criminal being crucified with Jesus derides him, saying “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us” (vs. 39).

What is significant about these three mocking statements is that each is a proclamation of both Jesus’ royal status and his role as Savior. Each of these people, who opposed everything Jesus stood for, announce to the world Jesus as Israel’s rightful Davidic monarch and the world’s savior – even though they do it ironically. What they do not recognize (and Israel’s religious leaders should have known better, because they knew the Old Testament scriptures) is that Jesus’ royal status and saviorhood is directly expressed through his suffering and death, not in spite of it. They see his crucifixion as being proof-positive that he is not the Messiah. However, those who truly know the Old Testament know that it proves his Messiahship, for Israel’s chosen one was to suffer and die (Psalm 22; Isaiah 42-53). For, even from the cross, Jesus can still call God “Father”, offer forgiveness and promise Paradise! He is still in charge, as the royal savior. Thus, whereas to Jesus’ enemies, his royal status and saviorhood is denied by his crucifixion, to believers (and to Luke), his royal status and saviorhood is proclaimed and affirmed through his crucifixion.

The second way that Jesus’ role as royal Savior is affirmed through today’s Gospel lesson is in the contrasting responses to Jesus that appear in this text. Israel’s leaders, the Roman soldiers and the one crucified criminal all clearly reject Jesus. But the response to Jesus by the people

and by the second crucified criminal is quite different and occurs in direct reaction against the rejecting response.

This is particularly clear in regards to the two criminals. When the first criminal “derides” (Luke’s word) Jesus by saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us”, the second criminal’s response to Jesus is a direct reaction to that mocking statement. Luke writes, “But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong”. Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”” (vss. 40-42).

Luke directly states that the second criminal “rebukes” the first for his criticism of and miscalculation of who Jesus is and what he has come to do. He confronts the man directly, calling him to accountability. He protests Jesus’ innocence, proclaiming that he has been wrongly accused and punished inappropriately. The second criminal recognizes that Jesus has done nothing worthy of crucifixion – the execution conducted by Rome only for matters of sedition or treason against the state.

But it is not only the second criminal that responds to Jesus. So do the people. Luke is very careful to note in the verse dealing with the Israelite leaders mocking Jesus, “and the people stood by” (vs. 35). That is, the ordinary people didn’t participate in their leaders denigrating talk about Jesus. Instead, they “stood by, watching”.

The words Luke uses here to describe the responses of Israel’s leaders and the people are most intriguing. The word describing the leaders’ response, translated “scoff” (*ekmukterizo*) literally means “turned up their noses at” and perfectly captures the expression in Psalm 22:7 (told about the leaders’ treatment of the messiah), “mock at (him), make mouths at (him), shake their heads (at him)”. On the other hand, the word describing the people’s response that is translated “stood by” (*histemi*) is one that captures the sense of recoiling in disgust from the other’s actions; it is to set oneself in silent but determined opposition to the action they are observing. So it was not that the people were standing by in a noncommittal way, acting like “looky-loos”. Rather, they were standing by silently disapproving the responses of their leaders to Jesus, and rejecting those leaders by that disapproval.

What this segment reveals, therefore, is that there is deep division in Israel over the crucifixion of Jesus. Those in positions of power or those (like the first criminal) seeking the mercy of the powerful see Jesus as an enemy of the state, guilty of high treason. But for the people, Jesus is a hero (because he has called a spade a spade), a prophet and perhaps even Messiah – the royal Savior who should be crowned king of the Jews, not crucified by Israel’s and Rome’s leaders! Thus, the people are rejecting the actions of both their Israelite leaders and the Romans. And with the rejection of their leaders’ actions, the people are silently expressing their embrace of Jesus to be, in reality, what their leaders are saying he is not: the royal son of David, the Messiah and the Savior of the world.

The third way this scripture lesson affirms Jesus as royal Savior is through the frequent testimony in this passage that Jesus is, indeed, the savior of his people. It is intriguing that the

verb, “to save” is used four times in this passage, even though those uses are to criticize Jesus (“He saved others”, “let him save himself”, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself”, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us”). Again, the assumption of his critics was that his crucifixion was proof positive that he did not have the capacity to save. Yet the reality was that from that cross, Jesus forgave all those who had been party to his crucifixion, when he prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (vs. 34). And he promises salvation to one of those who is crucified with him, with his declaration “Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (vs. 43). Even at the moment that he is facing his own death, Jesus is both able and chooses to act to forgive and to redeem people!

The incident of Jesus’ words of salvation to the second criminal on the cross is particularly noteworthy. This man initially perceives Jesus only as a man unjustly accused and sentenced. But with his words, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (vs. 42), he makes an immense step of faith (probably far greater than he realized he had made). Although he is dying on a cross, and rightfully so “for we are getting what we deserve”, the man turns to Jesus in faith and asks to be escorted by Jesus into his kingdom (which, he has to realize, is not going to rescue him from the cross anymore than it will rescue Jesus). And with his promise, Jesus does indeed escort him into his kingdom. The man is freed, liberated, made whole, and thus redeemed at the moment of both his death and of Jesus’ death.

This man is the first to recognize that Jesus’ death is not a contradiction of his regal status and saviorhood; it is rather an inevitable and integral part of that role. It is what that role is all about. And thus, this man becomes the first person to actually enter into Christ’s “kingdom” as a result of Jesus’ death on the cross – and thus, Jesus escorts him into “Paradise” – society as God intends it to be under the reign of King Jesus.

By his very words and actions on the cross, Jesus demonstrates that he has both the capacity and the willingness to forgive and to save people. It is precisely because he does not save himself that he is able to save others! In these acts of forgiveness, redemption and liberation, Jesus demonstrates that he is, indeed, both royal Son (and thus, the Messiah) and the Savior of the world. And that is why this Gospel lesson is selected for Christ the King Sunday!

Colossians 1:11-20 is one of the most profound social analyses made by Paul the Apostle, and certainly one of the most sophisticated in the scriptures. That analysis is directly built around the metaphor of Christ as King of all reality.

In order for 21st century Christians to understand Paul’s analysis, we must first understand the cosmology (or world-understanding) out of which Paul operated. This was a cosmology not unique to Paul, but held by most Jews and Gentiles within the 1st century Roman world. It is most expressed through Paul’s frequent reference to “thrones, dominions, principalities and powers” that were, at one and the same time, both heavenly and earthly.

To Jew and Gentile alike, the world of the physical and the world of the spiritual were closely intertwined. To ancient humanity, what might happen in the heavenlies would profoundly impact what occurred on earth, and what might happen on earth would influence heaven (that’s

why Jews and early Christians prayed). This perspective was held by absolutely everyone in the ancient Roman empire – Jew as well as Christian, pagan as well as believer, Greek as well as Roman. It was the way human beings of the 1st century understood life.

Because Paul believed there was an open door between the spiritual world and the physical world, he held that the governance of both worlds was also irretrievably linked. Thus Paul would build his theology of “the principalities and powers” on the premise that what happens in the spirit world has its counterpart on earth. Therefore the principalities and powers are not simply spiritual forces of heaven and of hell at war with each other. Nor are the principalities and powers simply the political, economic and religious systems of various governments and nations in competition with each other. They are both! At any given time and in any given situation, the principalities and powers are both spiritual and earthly, with the heavenly or “hellish” dimension of that power providing the spiritual power that would drive the performance and provide the power to any earthly system. Therefore, it was as if every political, economic or religious system of any society – whether it was Rome or Israel or any other nation – was spiritually “driven” or “possessed” by the corporate spirituality of the “heavenlies”. At any time, human systems were possessed by all-encompassing spiritual evil or good (or, often, a combination of both). Therefore, the power of Rome (for example) was not simply its law, its military and its leaders; it was also its corporate spirituality, which was the extension of the evil spirituality of its gods (or “demons”, as Paul would call them).

Colossians 1:15-20, most of our Epistle lesson for Christ the King Sunday, is one of Paul’s most illuminating statements about Christ. He writes, “Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross”.

This is a remarkable statement of Jesus as co-Creator. It stresses that Jesus is the physical manifestation of God. He is co-eternal with God (“He is before all things”) and, as the Second Person of the Trinity, shared with the First Person in creation (“firstborn over all creation”). He created everything that is in the universe as well as on the earth, everything material and everything spiritual. Therefore, Jesus is the creator of each human being who has ever lived or who will ever live, of all humanity, of the physical world and even of the universe. But he is also the creator of the political, economic and values-creating (religious) systems of every nation, government, business, religious, educational and social institution that orders human life. Further, Jesus is the creator of the spiritual forces (the angelic, demonic, heaven, hell) that lie behind these human systems, possess and control them. Jesus is the creator of the entirety of the cosmos!

One must be extremely careful what one is saying here, when one asserts the creative work of Christ. And Paul is very careful. The assertion that Christ is the creator of the principalities and powers does not mean that he created the Roman state to be the dominating and controlling

power of the 1st through 5th centuries' western world. To assert that would be to suggest that Jesus was responsible for the state's inequities, injustices or suppressions – that is, that Christ created evil.

Rather, what Paul is contending in this passage is that Christ is the creator of the powers themselves (the demonic/angelic forces behind the systems) and of the underlying need in humanity, motivated by those powers, to bring order, structure and systemization to their life together. That is, there is that which is God-given in human beings that demands order; it is that which makes humans human. But that this capacity to order life can be captured by the needs of people and systems to serve their own purposes, does not invalidate Christ's creation of both the need for order and the ability to create order. It only reveals how easily that innately positive need can be corrupted.

Why has God placed in humans the need to order life, and thus develop political, economic and religious systems that institutionalize that need? Paul tells us in today's epistle lesson that all that is created, but especially the demonic/angelic forces behind the systems and powers of the world, have been created "in, through and for Christ". That is, they are created as an integral part of the universe that God has planned. They are empowered by the power of God, from whom both the spiritual forces and the world's political/economic/religious systems structure and order life. But they are created for one purpose – and for one purpose only. That is (in the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith) "to glorify God and to enjoy him forever". In other words, all the systems of the world and the spiritual powers lying behind those systems, as well as every human being and all of creation itself, have been created to center on God and the service of God's creation. Therefore, for the powers to become diverted into lusting after possessions or power or prestige or parochialism is particularly grievous to God. For they are going against that purpose for which they were originally created and intended by God.

Paul goes on in today's epistle lesson to state that Jesus is not only co-creator with God of all the structures and powers in the cosmos. He is also their redeemer, as well. The final portion of this passage from Colossians (1:18-20) deals with Jesus' redemptive work. Paul points out that Christ, the creator of the created order, of the universe's spirituality, of all political, economic and religious systems created by humanity, and humans themselves, was also the first to conquer death at the hand of those systems. And he conquered death "so that he might come to have first place in everything" (vs. 18). Then Paul makes this unusual statement: "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (vs. 19).

Verse 19 is actually very difficult to translate from its original Greek into English. What it literally says is "For in (Christ, God) wanted the *pleroma* to dwell in him". *Pleroma* is the substance that fills up a gap or hole, like a patch. It is likely that Paul is trying to express the concept that, through Christ, the emptiness of the entire cosmos (people's emptiness, the inadequacies of every nation's political, economic and values systems, the noncompletion of nature itself) is being filled with the creative presence and redemptive power of God.

Paul finishes this remarkable passage with the words, "Through (Christ) God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (vs. 20).

Through his redemptive work on the cross, Jesus Christ has reconciled the entire cosmos (“whether things on earth or in heaven”) to God. All things are reconciled through him, and they are reconciled for or to him.

Who is reconciled? Everyone! Everything! It is not just people who are reconciled to God. It is the “thrones (the “seat” or symbolic institution of power), “dominions” (the sphere of influence of the “throne”), “rulers” (the specific person or people running the system) and “powers” (the sanctions and rules that legitimize the current occupant of the “throne” to run that system) of every nation and of every human-created institution (business, church, school, union, social center, club). It is the heavenly order whose power transforms or corrupts these institutions (the angelic/demonic forces). It is even the physical world and the entire universe. Everything and everyone is reconciled to God because Jesus has “made peace (between them) through the blood of his cross”. This is the profound analysis of how God has worked in the world through Jesus Christ to return the world and the universe to God’s intentions for it. For it is that redeeming, liberating work that will enable all people and all their systems “to glorify God and enjoy him forever”.

Although this profound analysis of how God is at work in the world to return it to his intentions ends here, Paul doesn’t begin it here. His opening words of this magnificent social analysis that are also part of today’s epistle lesson are “May you (that is, the Colossian Church) be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything, with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (1:11-14).

The epistle lesson ends with God’s great redemptive work for the entirety of the universe. But it begins with an individual church, and the people who make up that church. Although, in the final analysis, it is not about us but about God and God’s transformation of the world, Paul’s concern begins with us!

Paul begins this epistle lesson with these words: “May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (1:11-14).

Paul opens this lesson with what seems like a wish for the Church in Colossae. In reality, it is a prayer (vs. 9). Paul’s beloved Colossian Christians face the task of proclaiming and working for a Christ who is one with God in bringing every “throne, dominion, ruler and power” to center their nation or society in the glorification and enjoyment of God rather than the glorifying of themselves and enjoying all of life’s exquisite pleasures. In the light of such a task, how do these Christians act to share in the building of Christ’s Kingdom?

Paul tells them to undertake this great responsibility with endurance (“endure everything”), patience and thankful joy. What he is recommending to them, however, is really quite profound.

The Greek word Paul uses for “endurance” is *hupomone*, and for “patience”, *makrothumia*. The English word “endurance” (sometimes translated “fortitude”) has the sense of remaining firm in the face of hardship or misfortune, what is captured in the phrases “hanging in there” or “grin and bear it”. But this Greek word has much more the sense of triumphantly staying the course; it has a sense of glory or victory about it. It is moving “from strength to strength”. Nietzsche captured the sense of *hupomone* by talking about the human task as being “a long obedience in the same direction”. Thus, that to which Paul is calling the Colossian Christians is a joyful long-term and unwavering commitment to the task of working for Christ’s Kingdom, knowing that victory is assured and thus rejoicing in that reality.

Likewise, Paul uses the Greek word, *makrothumia*, which is often translated into English as “patience” or “long-suffering”. But whereas the English word has the sense about it of bearing pain or trials calmly or without complaint, the Greek word has much more of a peopled sense about it. It is the kind of patience a person will have with a small child, in which one has placed such an investment in that child, she/he is willing to put up with all sorts of immaturity because of the dream of what that small child can someday become. As William Barclay says of the word, “It is the quality of mind and heart which enables a man so to bear with people that their unpleasantness and maliciousness and cruelty will never drive him to bitterness, that their unteachableness will never drive him to despair, that their folly will never drive him to irritation, and that their unloveliness will never alter his love” (*The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, Westminster Press, 1975, p. 110).

Finally, Paul instructs the Christians in Colossae to approach their task “joyfully giving thanks to the Father who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints”. The emotion that should run through the entirety of our work as Christians is joyful thanks – gratitude to God for what God has done in us and through us for the world and all its systems, a gratitude that springs from the depths of joy awakened in us by God’s liberation of us!

Thus, Paul is encouraging the Colossian Christians to enthusiastically embrace the mission to which they are called by God. The coming of Christ’s kingdom and, consequently, the ultimate transformation of both the heavenly powers and the political, economic and religious systems of the world into systems of justice, equity and relational love will ultimately depend upon God’s impact upon them through the salvific and liberating work of Jesus Christ. But the Colossians are to embrace their role and responsibility in enabling God’s work to take place. They are to be, in their actions, involved in public life and in their words, signs of God’s kingdom, approaching their work for the transformation of the world with joyously staying the course, loving the movers and shakers of these systems in spite of their unjust actions, being joyful in the Spirit and thankful for God’s commitment to the redemption of the world. And why? Because “God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” – and not only we, but God’s whole created world!