

Christ the King Sunday, Covenant Anglican (2019)
Rev. Dr. R. William Dickson

Introduction: This is the last Sunday of the year. Next Sunday, the First Sunday of Advent, will be the first Sunday of the new liturgical year. So you might say that today, this week, we are being invited to experience liturgically the end. But in what sense do we mean this idea of the “end”? Surely as those who are in relationship with an eternal God we cannot mean “end” in the sense of discontinuation or cessation. And certainly, as those who worship and follow the risen Lord we cannot mean “end” in the sense of expiration or extinction. No, we are thinking of the end in terms of its telos, its goal, its destination, its purpose, its overarching intention or meaning.

This, the final Sunday of the liturgical year, reminds us that human history is advancing purposefully toward a particular end. We are not always granted the vision to perceive this purposeful advance, but we do believe in a sovereign God whose purposes cannot ultimately be thwarted. So it is quite impossible for us, as those who worship the living God and follow the risen Lord, to live well and wisely within this world unless we are clear about the ultimate end of this world. Do we understand where things are headed ultimately? Do we live our lives now in a manner which is consistent with that reality?

Our assigned readings and our particular liturgy on this Christ the King Sunday are wanting to give us a vision of where our lives and all of human history are heading.

Hear again the day's collect,

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

And then there's a part of our eucharistic liturgy which comes right after the Sursum Corda "*Lift up your hearts*" called the Proper Preface which focuses us once again on the central themes of this day. So just a bit later in this morning's worship we'll be praying together,

Celebrant Lift up your hearts.

People We lift them up to the Lord.

Celebrant Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

People It is right to give him thanks and praise.

The Celebrant continues

It is right, our duty and our joy, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.

The Proper Preface (not to be heard for another year)

Through your only begotten Son Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords; for you have seated him at your right hand in glory, and put all things in subjection under his feet, that he may present them to you, O Father, perfectly restored in beauty, truth, and love.

So it is clear from our liturgy that we are to see a triumphant Jesus, seated at the right hand of the Father with the entire universe having been put in subjection to him, and now properly and harmoniously restored in beauty, truth and love. And he is reigning over the world as its preeminent lord, its king. And in that reign the world has been perfectly and beautifully restored.

That reference to restoration is found both in the Collect and in the Proper Preface. And you might remember that there was a reference to this restoration in last week's collect where we mentioned in that prayer,

*“when our Savior Jesus Christ comes **to restore** all things . . .”*

The creator and redeemer of this world does not throw away this world like disposable trash and replace it with another; rather, he restores this world. There never should have been any doubt about his restorative intentions. After all, the creator has in the incarnation partaken of the materiality of his own creation. Of course that creation was something which the creator and redeemer God would restore and glorify! The incarnation disallows any other possibility.

And as Paul stated so clearly in Romans 8,

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

The whole created order is longing for its day of redemption, its deliverance from its bondage to corruption. And that day will be its restoration to its paradisaal conditions of the garden, but even better!

But what do our assigned texts show us about the ultimate telos or end of this restored human life within this world? Several things of immense significance.

I. The reign of the divine King means that humanity will be brought together into its creator's intended shalom, or harmony, or properly ordered unity.

While it might be true that all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put poor Humpty back together again, there must be no doubt that it is the will of the Father that a broken, shattered and scattered humanity will be brought together under the beneficent reign of the Divine Son.

The Fall in the Garden of Eden immediately sent shock waves of chaos, disunity and disharmony rippling out into the most important relations between God's image bearers. Eve was warned that she would now bear within her fallen heart a treacherous desire against her husband. The language "*your desire will be for him*" is virtually identical to the warning in chapter 4 when Cain is warned that "*sin is crouching at the door and its desire is for you.*" Desire to destroy and devour like a stalking beast! And Adam will suddenly discover that this beautiful being created by God to be the queen of the world and his helpmate in all things would now be a creature he would be very inclined, very tempted to dominate,

to subjugate. I think the ESV SB gets the thrust of the language just right in its note. It states,

The leadership role of the husband and the complementary relationship between husband and wife that were ordained by God before the fall have now been deeply damaged and distorted by sin. This especially takes the form of inordinate desire (on the part of the wife) and domineering rule (on the part of the husband).

The battle between the sexes was not launched in the 60's but rather in the beginning, in the Garden.

And then remember, the very next thing we encounter in the Genesis account is the despicable murder of one brother by another — bloody fratricide.

Sin has since the very beginning been doing a terrible number not merely or even primarily on the individual human soul, but on the very fabric of human community.

Elaboration: For it is the very nature of evil that it scatters humanity rather than permitting it to live in harmonious shalom or intimate and peaceful community.

We remember Jesus' parable of the Good Shepherd who guides and keeps the flock together in safety. Indeed, his commitment to the safety of his flock is such that he lays down his life for the sheep, to keep them safe from the wolf. But the wolf's intention, Jesus says, *is to snatch and scatter them*. For scattered sheep are those outside the protective care of the watchful Shepherd. We were never created to live as solitary sheep but as a flock, a flock under the shepherd's care and protection. And as Jesus once reminded his disciples,

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom."

So in today's OT lesson, Jeremiah is referencing this tendency of evil to disrupt harmonious and authentic community. Israel's leadership, here called shepherds, should have guarded that flock's unity and integrity. But they did not. God says through the prophet,

"You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them."

So the Almighty promises that He will raise up a true shepherd, one who will reunite God's people.

5 “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king 2 and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. 6 In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’

So Jeremiah speaking under inspiration has very clearly and explicitly stated that in the future a descendant of David would suddenly come forth like a branch, a shoot, or sprig, from the apparently dead stump of the Davidic line. And he would fulfill the ideals of kingship. He would regather God’s people and serve as their shepherd and king. A descendant of David. A shepherd/king like David.

But if we take a moment and compare Ezekiel’s very similar prophetic rant against the false shepherds, we see an intriguing difference.

So in Ezekiel 34,

The word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds,

Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! . . . (a view verses down) My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

But what then is the divine remedy spoken by Ezekiel. Is it a descendant of David, such as mentioned in Jeremiah?

Here's what God says.

For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God.

I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

So if we are comparing the two shepherd passages, Jeremiah 23 and Ezekiel 34, there's no way we can avoid asking ourselves one particular question — which is this, — Is the promised shepherd a descendant of David or God himself?

And that question almost echoes a question that Jesus asked the Pharisees in Matthew 22. — *Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, "The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"?" If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?" And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.*

How can David in that messianic Psalm, Psalm 110, speak of his future descendant as his Lord? What sense does that make? Or how can Jeremiah and Ezekiel both be speaking the truth when one claims that a descendant of David will be the shepherd of God's people while the other claims that God himself will be that shepherd? What sense does that make?

It remains an insoluble riddle wrapped in an enigma and always will until and unless we start to rethink the matter in light of the gospel's most foundational claim — incarnation. The eternal God taking on human nature.

Is the Shepherd one who would be born a descendant of David or the eternal God himself? He is both. He is one and the same. He is the incarnate God and his name is Jesus! And the purview of his reign knows no bounds.

Elaboration: So our gospel's contribution to this developing theme is the way it shows the blinkered, the utterly truncated and inadequate understanding of Jesus' kingship which Pilate (and others) were entertaining. A few verses before the beginning of our gospel text we hear Pilate asking Jesus,

“Are you the King of the Jews?” And he answered him, “You have said so.”

And then there we see the confused inscription written out on a board above his head — *“This is the King of the Jews.”* John’s gospel adds the detail that this inscription was written in three languages — Hebrew, Latin and Greek. But as many languages as one might use in making the claim, it is fundamentally and profoundly inadequate. I’m not saying it’s false; I’m saying it’s inadequate and therefore misleading.

This one on the cross is no merely national king of a lesser nation, of a lesser people. He is, in fact, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the King of the World! And as such his outstretched arms nailed to that cross point toward the reality that he is recalling a scattered humanity back together under his beneficent reign. His universal reign will be a time of peace and unity. The pernicious work of the wolf who scatters will be undone and overthrown.

II. Secondly and finally, the reign of the divine King means the reintegrative and redemptive work of the Divine Shepherd to call together once again the people of God will be part and parcel of a much broader and more comprehensive reconciliation which is indeed cosmic in its scope.

So from our epistle text we hear this amazing language,

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. 15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Prior to our salvation we had been part of one kingdom. That was the kingdom of darkness of which its overlord was the Prince of Darkness. Paul puts it this way in Ephesians 2,

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

But God in saving us transferred us from the kingdom of darkness and damnation into the radiant kingdom of his beloved Son. Once we had been destined for eternal wrath and unspeakable anguish, now we are amongst the saints of God whose end is unimaginable glory.

And the glory of God's redemption accomplished by this divine shepherd is not merely a glory of humanity's final reuniting under the benevolent Kingship of this Divine King and Shepherd; it is a reuniting, a reconciliation of the entire universe, material and immaterial, mortal and spiritual.

We might not have noticed, but in both today's collect and in today's Proper Preface it was explicitly stated that the reintegrative redemptive intentions of this Divine King pertain to "*all things.*" So the collect,

whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son,

And the Proper Preface,

for you have seated him at your right hand in glory, and put all things in subjection under his feet,

This all things is by no means limited to the visible, material world of humankind. Paul, in our epistle text, very explicitly references the reconciliation of *“all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”*

A very similar statement in Ephesians 1 puts it this way,

[M]aking known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

If Pilate and those watching Jesus die on the cross were greatly mistaken to imagine that his claim was merely to be the King of the Jews, rather than the King of the World, we would make a similar mistake if we imagined that the scope of his redemptive intent only pertained to humanity and had no bearing on the invisible and spiritual realm. All of it, every single bit of it is being placed under the Lordship of this Divine King we worship and adore.

The scope of God’s redemptive intention is universal. And while He does allow his created beings with the gift of free will to reject Him, he nonetheless is in the end pulling the whole universe, things on earth and things in heaven under the authority of his rule.

It is stated this way in Philippians 2,

And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

So humanity's reconciliation to itself and to its Creator and Lord is but a part of a much broader, cosmic reconciliation. Would it be right to speak of a universal redemption? No, it would not.

A commentator of note puts the matter very plainly,

The "all things" of v. 20 occurs five other times in the context, and in each case the referent is the created universe. And, of course, in this context, Paul goes on to specify that the scope of "all things" includes things on earth or things in heaven. The neuter form (Gk. τὰ πάντα) and the parallelism with v. 16 make clear that all created things are included. Since at least the time of Origen, then, some interpreters have used this verse to argue for universal salvation: in the end,

God will not (and often, it is suggested cannot) allow anything to fall outside the scope of his saving love in Christ. Universal salvation is a doctrine very congenial to our age, and it is not therefore surprising that this verse, along with several others in Paul, are regularly cited to argue for this belief. This is not the place to refute this doctrine, which, we briefly note, cannot be reconciled with clear New Testament teaching about the reality and eternality of Hell. But particularly relevant to the meaning of v. 20 is Paul's teaching in 2:15 that God "having disarmed the powers and authorities . . . made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." The spiritual beings to which Paul refers explicitly in v. 20 are not saved by Christ but vanquished by him (see 2:15).

No, it would be right to speak of the Father's cosmic redemptive agenda and the universal pacification which results from it. Some will accept the forgiveness and come into the fellowship of his joy and love. And others will at last recognize the futility and pointlessness of continuing to war against him, but will not receive him in a saving way. But in the end, one way or another, his reign is universal and the entire universe, all things, are subjected to him.

Conclusion: So in sum, how then should live right here, right now in light of this certain end or telos of the world as we presently know it?

1) We should live confidently, courageously, joyously. We have seen the end of the story and know that all will be well. Thus we can face the losses, the heartbreaks, and the challenges of life in this broken and fallen world undaunted. Our setbacks, our losses and disappointments are temporary. And they are as nothing compared to the glory which will soon be ours as subjects and co-heirs of the Divine King.

2) We must live urgently making every effort to be those who are a centripetal force amongst God's people and in this world, rather than a centrifugal or divisive power. Are we those who love and further authentic community and true and authentic intimacy or are we instead those agents of chaos and rebellion which do the bidding of the wolf who scatters?

God's redemptive intentions for his people and for his world are reintegrative and unitive rather than fragmenting, scattering or ultimately chaotic. Do we live now in this world as people of peace and harmony? This is not a world in which such intentions have much of a presence, but think of the counter-cultural impact of a community of peace-makers in a world such as this.

3) And lastly, will we, can we through the eyes of faith, informed by the Biblical revelation learn to perceive the immense grandeur of what God is doing in this world, and so much of it entirely beyond the reach of our human vision?

We are at the center of a cosmic redemptive drama so vast, so sweeping that it boggles the mind even the ponder it. We must put the smaller challenges of our lives in this strictly mortal and human setting in the broader context of God's universal intention. Do you remember how Paul chided the Corinthians who couldn't quite work out some trivial differences between them and were resorting to the secular courts for resolution? Do we even believe what he says?

When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life!

His point couldn't be clearer. How can the saints of God who will judge the world, who will in fact judge angels not sort out these trivial little differences between you? "Get a grip," he's saying. "Do you not have the slightest idea who you really are?" Judges of the world? Judges of angels? Have we even begun to grasp our place within God's cosmic scheme of reconciliation?

If we do, I suspect we will live a bit higher, a bit more elevated, a bit more focused, a bit more joyous of the glories about to be revealed. The Divine King, the King of Love will shortly reign triumphant over all things. The One of whom it is rightly and truly said *“whose service is perfect freedom”* is about to reign over all. And as Jesus encouraged his beleaguered disciples He also encourages us,

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”

To which we can only respond, “Amen and Amen. Come LORD JESUS. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.