

The “Forgotten Festival”

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Isaiah 51:4-6; Psalm 93; Revelation 1:4b-8; Mark 13:24-37

In the church calendar the last Sunday of the Pentecost season — the last Sunday of the church year that begins next Sunday with Advent — is an observance we could call the “forgotten festival.” If you didn’t have your bulletin before you tonight, would you even have come into the church knowing that tomorrow was the Sunday known as “Christ the King?”

Let’s have a little interactive session this evening. There are two events in the church calendar that everybody in our culture knows about; what two events would those be? . . .

Yes, everybody knows about Christmas, and most people know about Easter and maybe Good Friday along with it. And many Christians know about a few other special days. One is Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and Peter preached Jesus risen from the dead for the very first time. For that reason Pentecost is sometimes called the “birthday of the church.” And since there aren’t any major days after Pentecost, that season lasts all summer and into the fall and is only ending now. And there are a few other special days many Christians might be able to identify, such as Epiphany celebrating the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus, the revelation of the Messiah to the Gentiles. Of course Lutherans are big on Reformation Day, the eve of All Saints.

But what about the “forgotten festival,” Christ the King, the last Sunday before Advent? To know more about this event and what it signifies we need to look at the lessons for today, so we’ll take them one by one.

In our first lesson, the prophet Isaiah speaks in the Lord’s name: “a law will go out from, me, and I will set my justice for a light to the peoples. My righteousness draws near, my salvation has gone out, and my arms will judge the peoples” (Isaiah 51:4b-5a).

In recent years in our political environment there has been a great outcry for “social justice,” but it hasn’t been the kind of justice the Scriptures proclaim to us. The justice of the Bible is not “diversity, equity, and inclusion” or DEI. The justice Scripture proclaims is *righteousness and truth*, or “light” as the text has it. The justice of God means that things that are crooked, or “out of whack,” get straightened up — for that’s the meaning of the Hebrew word *tsedeq* that Isaiah uses, straightness or correctness.

This means that justice involves shining the light of truth on our values and actions, and those of others as well, and asking, “Do they make sense, are they healthy and beneficial — or are they twisted and hurtful to people, to others and to ourselves?” *Getting things straightened out* is the key to salvation — *yeshu’ah*, Isaiah says, or deliverance, liberation, rescue — the same word that’s the basis for Jesus’ name in Hebrew, *Yeshua’*. “You shall call his name Jesus,” Joseph was told, “for he will deliver his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Christ the King comes *to straighten things out*.

Let’s turn to Psalm 93, our responsive reading. This Psalm belongs to a group of Psalms that scholars call the “enthronement Psalms” because they celebrate God taking up his rule as king. “The Lord is King,” the Psalm proclaims. “Ever since the world began, your throne has been established; you are from everlasting” (Psalm 93:1a, 3). The Lord is King because the world is his creation, it belongs to him: “He has made the whole world so sure that it cannot be moved” (93:2).

The New Testament writers see Jesus as the Word of God, participating in the creation of all things from the very beginning. As John states, “He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:2-3). That’s an astounding thing to say about a flesh-and-blood man who walked, and ate, and slept, and worked, like any ordinary human — and died tortured on a Roman cross.

But John is not alone. The writer of Hebrews speaks of Jesus this way: “In these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Hebrews 1:2-3). The apostle Paul puts it like this: “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. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:16-17).

How did the earliest followers of Jesus come to think of him this way? Well, when a man gets raised from the dead and appears to you, it’s hard to view him as just an ordinary human being. It’s hard not to take seriously his teaching about himself and about the kingdom of God — especially when he declares, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18). Messiah Jesus is King because he owns the creation, since it came into being through him. And the gospel is not simply, “Jesus died to take away our sins.” The gospel is really, “Jesus is Lord, and all things belong to him and all people are responsible to him.” That’s the message of Christ the King Sunday, the message we need to put out into our surrounding godless culture.

Our third reading, from the Revelation, is perhaps an even more forceful declaration of the kingship of Jesus, and what’s more, it *brings us into the picture*. John calls Jesus “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.” And he adds, “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (Revelation 1:5-6). The followers of Jesus are called *priests*, and a priest is a representative of the deity he serves. So you and I, as believers, are representatives and *administrators of the Lord’s kingdom*. We are to be, as Peter says, “a royal priesthood” and our mission is to “proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

In our Gospel reading, Jesus warns his disciples about the great Day that is coming, what the prophet Joel calls “the great and terrible day of the Lord” (Joel 2:31), a day when, as Jesus says, “the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory” (Mark 13:26). A day is coming, Scripture tells us, when the powers of evil will be cast down and “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14). It’s the day of Christ the King.

But that day is not just some day in the immediate or distant future, only God the Father knows when — as Jesus reminds us. The day of Christ the King is also the day when his priests take action to administer and enforce his rule over all things. It’s the day — any day — when the followers of Jesus rise up to speak truth into whatever situation they find themselves, and apply godly common sense to that situation. It’s the day when believers apply the test of God’s truth to the twisted beliefs and false authorities they confront, so that what is evil and godless may be exposed as crooked and distorted and the straightness of God’s righteousness may be applied. As Psalm 149 puts it:

Let the godly exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their beds.
Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands,
to execute vengeance on the nations and punishments on the peoples,
to bind their kings with chains and their nobles with fetters of iron,

to execute on them the judgment written!

This is honor for all his godly ones. Praise the Lord!” (Psalm 149:5-9)

We do this through our wise and righteous conduct of life. We do this through our testimony to the power of the Word of God. We do this through our giving to support our church and organizations pursuing a righteous cause. We do this through our vote and our participation in public discourse about major issues. In these ways and others, the “forgotten festival” of Christ the King becomes manifest in our environment and Jesus takes his rightful place as Lord of all.

But we’re not quite through. We have one more question to ask, so let’s go back into interactive session. Someone tell me, please: How many gods are there — I mean, real gods? . . .

How many gods are there? We understand that God is one. But if we could ask this question in the Roman world of the first century, that’s not the answer we would have received. The ancient Mediterranean world was inundated with false deities, and the one-God message of the early Christians came as a shock and offense. In his book *Destroyers of the Gods* Larry Hurtado has described the situation like this:

In the rich and diverse religious environment of the Roman world, early Christianity was different in the pattern of its beliefs and its religious practices. Among the particular features that distinguished Christianity from traditional “pagan” religious practice and from many other new religious movements of the time was the firm insistence that there is only one “true and living God,” and the demand that its adherents had to drop all worship of any other deity. . . . Early Christianity was so different that many Roman-era people recoiled from Christian beliefs and practices, accusing Christians of rank impiety and even atheism. (Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyers of the Gods*, 2016, pp. 37-38)

And, truly, that’s our situation today. People hold to their identities and ideologies with religious fervor, and look at everything through the lens of these religions whether they be climate alarmism, racial exclusiveness, sexual identity, some political ideology, or the religion of just plain self-worship — “my way.” And if Christians call these religions into question, people will apply all sorts of labels to us like “bigots” or “deplorables.” They probably won’t call us “atheists,” as they called the earliest Christians, but in a sense that’s what we are; we are atheists because we believe in only one God, and his Son who declares, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.”

So the early Christians were called atheists because, coming from their Jewish origin, they limited their inventory of deities to *one*. And that one God also wrapped up Jesus into himself. As the apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians, “For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth — as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’ —yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” And then he adds, “However, not all possess this knowledge” (1 Corinthians 8:5-7a). As followers of Jesus it’s our mission to make known this knowledge: there is only one God and his Son Jesus the Messiah, and he has authority over all things to bring them into righteousness and truth. And that, I believe, is the message of the “forgotten festival,” Christ the King.

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