

The Sunday next before Advent, Year B  
Revelation 1.4b-8  
Psalm 93  
John 18.33-37

Feast of Christ the King  
Christ Church, Vienna Austria  
The Ven. Dr. Walter Baer  
November 21, 2021

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In 1976, during my senior year at the University of Wisconsin, I attended a meeting of the American Institute of Chemical Engineers in Chicago, where I was with a small group of fellow students to present a paper. (This was during “mein erstes Studium”, as they would say here, when I became a Chemical Engineer. A few years later I would start “mein zweites Studium” in theology.) On the Sunday, which happened to be the First Sunday of Advent, another student and I, attended the 8:00 a.m. Holy Communion service in the chapel of St. James’ Cathedral, the cathedral church of the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago.

I remember this, because the Dean of the cathedral gave what was to my mind a very interesting sermon.

He talked about the well-known tension within the Season of Advent between the Coming of Christ in Glory, emphasized on Advent I, and the Coming of Christ in humility at Christmas, which is the focus of the later Sundays of Advent.

What stuck with me was a statement that he made in passing. He noted that on the last Sundays of the church year and the first Sundays of Advent, the church hears lessons about the consummation of all things in Christ, about the second coming of Christ.

In his rather old-fashioned language, he noted that this is something that is not talked about in the “established churches”, but that it was “salutary” that we should hear about this at least briefly during this season, and to dwell on this. As the established churches had neglected these matters, the Dean noted, there have arisen over the centuries all sorts of millenarian movements and sects, focusing precisely on these last things. Some of these groups followed a charismatic leader, many develop elaborate timelines for the end times, attempting to identify current events with biblical prophecies, others developed into denominations or religions of their own, such as the Adventists, the Mormons, or the Jehovah’s Witnesses, but also heavily influencing older groups like the Baptists, revivalistic evangelicalism and Pentecostalism.

The Dean of Chicago’s final remark was to ask, had the established churches dealt more robustly with these “last things” over the years, perhaps these kinds of movements outside the historic churches would not have arisen. Unfortunately, he didn’t go into this any more deeply.

The good Dean of Chicago’s thoughts on this subject struck me, and obviously, after 45 years I still remember them.

Today is a Sunday that we as Anglicans and Episcopalians call “Christ the King,” as do our Old Catholics and Roman Catholics friends, or the Sunday next before Advent. Our Protestant friends call it “Ewigkeitssonntag.” All have both a sense of finality as well as anticipation.

This year, both of our readings for this Sunday are from the wider tradition of John, the Book of Revelation, and the Gospel of John, showing us the Kingship or the Reign of Christ in two very different ways. One image is the one that is well known here at Christ Church. It is a focus of our meditation here in the largest of the three East-facing lancet windows, depicting Christ the King.

The window shows the image much as described in the Revelation 1: A king, the ruler of kings of the earth, and as also the one “whom they pierced.” What is not clear from the view in the nave is that in this image, the wounds of crucified Christ, whom our text describes as “the firstborn of the dead”, are still visible. His hands and feet bear the marks of the crucifixion, even in his exaltation and enthronement. [Now you might wonder how I examined the window so closely. Well, it is beautifully depicted on the Christ Church Wikipedia page – which I ran across recently.]

A favorite Advent hymn, by Charles Wesley, is a meditation on Christ in glory, comes from these opening verses of the Book of Revelation. “Lo! He comes, with clouds descending”. In the middle stanzas, we sing:

2 Ev’ry eye shall now behold him  
Robed in glorious majesty;  
Those who set at naught and sold him,  
Pierced and nailed him to the tree,  
Deeply wailing, deeply wailing,  
Shall their true Messiah see.

3 Those dear tokens of his Passion  
Still his dazzling body bears,  
Cause of endless exultation  
To his ransomed worshipers.  
With what rapture, with what rapture,  
Gaze we on those glorious scars!

This ultimate hope is something that we do indeed need to keep in front of us, and it is a comfort that this image of the exalted Christ as King should greet worshippers here each Sunday. Contemplation of this is something that instills hope. The final destiny of our lives, the final destiny of our world, are in good hands. That is something that can be of immeasurable comfort and strength for us in the here and now.

This glimpse of the Christ as King is not only a future event – reserved for some final coming of Christ to set all thing right. No, this exalted Christ, the writer tells us, is a present reality. Revelation gives us a glimpse, it uncovers **what is very much present, but not seen**. John the Seer sees into the depths of reality in his vision. He speaks of the seven spirits, and later,

of the seven lampstands and the seven churches. Seven is the number of completeness. In the midst of these is Christ. This not to be understood as a faraway image, but that which is going on in our midst, even today. One day, the text tells us, this will be revealed to everyone, but today this can be experienced by those who call upon his name. We experience this Christ in our midst by our acts of praise, our hearing and responding to God's word, and receiving the sacraments. Today, we are privileged to celebrate two sacraments, holy baptism, by which Bob, an adult believer, is incorporated into the life of the church, and in holy communion where we again and again experience the forgiving and loving presence of Christ. So, we experience Christ the Lord in our midst and experience his reign among us, as we await his full revelation in glory.

From this unseen, but real, world, John, at the start of our text, brings us greetings:

“Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” (Rev. 1:4b)

This is difficult to grasp, and a reality far beyond our everyday experience – perhaps moving into the realm of the apocalyptic. Some would say it moves into the realm of the mythic, and a part of the Christian hope that no longer can speak to people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Here our lesson from the Gospel is a help.

We all know about trials, and even unjust trials. We see them too often in our times. The arrogant but insecure Roman governor of Judea, Pontus Pilate, is interrogating Jesus. It is about Kingship.

(But) Jesus answer(s), “My kingdom **is not from** this world. If my kingdom were **from this world**, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”

Pilate had asked Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” That claim would have been enough to get Jesus killed as a rival to Caesar and the Roman Empire. But Jesus' kingship differed from all the world's claimants to that title. He responds to Pilate's question, “My kingdom does not belong to this world.” But that doesn't mean it is somewhere else. **Jesus' kingdom is very much here and now** -- in this world. Jesus is not exempting us his followers from an involvement in this world. Quite the contrary. We have a part to play in bringing about Jesus' Kingdom where peace, justice, truth and love are concrete signs that Jesus reigns in this world. When the world's earthly rulers and institutions dominate by force, violence and economic exploitation, the source of Jesus' power comes from a very different and holier source. Jesus' rule calls us to a manifest an “alternative culture,” even a “counter culture.”

While the world's rulers draw the lines of their power on a map, Jesus draws his on the human heart. We have welcomed King Jesus and his reign into our hearts and so our lives should constantly reflect the source and rule of the one we follow.

Citizens usually have papers, or documents, that attest they are citizens of the land. What do we have to prove we are citizens of Christ's reign? We have the gift of the Holy Spirit

who enables us to give witness by our lives that we are followers of Jesus, citizens under his rule. In other words, our lives are more than ample proof of where and in whom our allegiance lies -- who rules our hearts and minds.

Today, in our world much is confused. Here in Austria, we stand before another lockdown, and wonder about the political leadership in our various countries, and how they handle such things as public health emergencies in a timely manner. Or one hears of a trial, in my native Wisconsin, where a young man who brings an assault weapon to a peaceful protest, kills three people, claims self-defense, and then is declared not guilty by a jury on Friday. Or one sees a corrupt autocrat in Belarus import and exploit refugees to destabilize a European border, in order to distract from his own misrule. It is good in such times to be reminded that we who follow Christ are also members of a different kingdom, which is not from this world but very much present in it. ***And it is the kingdom that will last.***

These examples, and countless others, can as the good Dean of Chicago noted so many years ago, lead some people to endless speculation about the end-times. Or, it can spur people to action in the knowledge that there is another kingdom present. There is another King to whom we have given our allegiance. This one is both present to us and will bring all things to a good end.

Another favorite hymn, one often sung at Evensong, "The day thou gavest Lord is ended", ends with this stanza, with which I close,

So be it, Lord; Thy throne shall never,  
Like earth's proud empires, pass away:  
Thy kingdom stands, and grows forever,  
Till all Thy creatures own Thy sway.

So be it. Amen.