

The Justification of the Ungodly

Romans 4:5

A sermon for Christ the King Sunday

Today marks the end of the season of Pentecost in the Christian calendar. We're usually not conscious of the fact that the season of Pentecost is divided into four parts. The first part is about the greening, the awakening of nature, the second about seeding, the third part about growth, and the fourth part of the Pentecost season is about harvest. The same is true for the hymns. They, too, are about the harvest.

What will be the yield and the quality of the harvest? When will the end come? We know that people are calculating the time of the end. There was a time when some people misused the Mayan calendar to figure out the time of the end. And more recently New Age spiritualists have said that because of the alignment of the planets, we know the end is coming, and you had better get ready. We kind of smile and tolerate these prophets of the end times.

We also know about the Jehovah Witnesses and the Branch Davidians, cults that are just outside the limits of Christianity. This kind of apocalyptic thinking is found not only among Christians but also found in some Jewish groups and in Islam. This kind of apocalyptic thinking is about having the inside track, having a leg up. "We are the elite. We have an advantage. We're on the inside. We're in the know."

In the Second and Third Centuries there was a kind of apocalyptic thinking called Gnosticism, having a spark of the divine, already knowing the mind of God. It's the greatest danger the church has faced in the 2,000 years of its existence. "We'll make it because we have the inside track, gnosis/special knowledge."

Two illustrations: In 1913 people were optimistic. Although there had been the great stock market crash of 1893-94, it was soon over. There was a saying from that time that you surely know: "Every day in every way we're getting better and better." In 1913 things were going well, and there were six great world empires. There was the Ottoman-Turkish Empire that had the whole Eastern end of the Mediterranean. There was the Russian Empire. The Austrian-Hungarian Empire which had the lower half of Central Europe. The German Empire which had the upper half of Central Europe. And then there were the French and the English Empires.

Five years later four of those empires had disappeared. The Ottoman-Turkish, the Austrian-Hungarian, the Russian, and the German. And the English and French empires were so weakened that they did not last another thirty years.

The point is that in 1913 no one imagined that five years later there could have been such massive change. All the optimism about progress disappeared. These were the civilized nations. Who could imagine that this could happen in the nations that produced Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Dante.

The second illustration: In his ancient Greek tragedies Sophocles wrote about Nemesis. The ancients knew that there was this madness in the human race that we think we can outmaneuver the tragedies of life.

Again and again the Bible warns against our apocalyptic way of thinking. Mark 13:32: "No one knows the time of the end, not the angels, not even the Son, but only the Father." There are five places in the New Testament where it says that the end will come like **a thief** in the night:

- Matt 24:43: "If the householder had known in what part of the night **the thief** was coming, he would have watched and not let his house be broken into."
- 1 Thess 5:2: "For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like **a thief** in the night."
- 2 Peter 3:10: "But the day of the Lord will come like **a thief**."
- Rev 3:3: "If you will not awake, I will come like **a thief**, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you."
- Rev 16:15: "Lo, I am coming like **a thief!** Blessed is he who is awake, keeping his garments that he may not go naked and be seen exposed!"

We don't know when the end is coming. We make big plans. In Psalm 2:4 and Psalm 37:13 the Lord laughs. It's not a gentle laugh, but a scoffing laugh at us for thinking we run the universe. We think: "We know the way the world works; we are the elite who are better informed. We have the inside knowledge of how things can be managed."

Where is the Lord in all of this? We have an apocalyptic Lord. "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! (Romans 11:33).

Remember how the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9) came to be. The people said: "Come let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let

us make a name for ourselves" (Gen 11:4). But the Lord would not permit his creatures to be equal with him.

The Lord created a new people and said: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Therefore you shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:2). They were slaves, nothing, and they became a great nation.

The Lord chose David, a shepherd boy, to become a great king" (1 Sam 16:12).

The Israelites fell into idolatry. They lost their temple and their land. They lost everything. They were exiled to Babylonia. Yet the Lord brought them out of exile.

What does the Christian witness say? We come back to the Nicene Creed. It says: "God is Jesus." Yes, we know that's the cross and resurrection. We forget what comes next: "through him all things were made." The Trinity, God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, created the world out of nothing. That is in the Old Testament and in the New. Romans 4:17: The Lord "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. . . ."

The cultural religion of our time is "scientism." This is not true science. This cultural religion is confronted by two facts: 1) Why is there something rather than nothing? and, 2) Why is there order rather than chaos? This cultural religion says: "We'll just assume these starting points," which immediately makes scientism a matter of faith, a matter of religion.

The Lord who created everything out of nothing then did the most astonishing thing of all: He justified the ungodly (Romans 4:5). The Holy One who is the Lord of all, who created out of nothing, took on sin, death, and evil. The biggest event of all is that God died on the cross and rose again. It is the event that determines all other events.

Luther sorts it out in a very specific way when he wrote: There is the big death and the little death. For those who are in Christ Jesus, the big death took place on the cross. There is nothing to be added. As it says in John 19:30: "It is finished." We who are in him face our own deaths, the little death, not to make light of them, but in the big picture the main thing is still what the Lord has done in Christ Jesus.

For this reason we close sermons with the promise and comfort of Philippians 4:7: "The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Amen

Let us stand and sing: "Rejoice, the Lord is King!"