

King of kings and Lord of lords

A Sermon for Christ the King Sunday

In the church year this Sunday is New Year's Eve and the new year begins next Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent. As we typically do on New Year's Eve, we take stock of what has been and look ahead at what is to come.

Looking back at this past year we see that Christian churches in our country and elsewhere are struggling, as we are individually, due to a volatile world, financial pressures, and a corrosive secularism. On top of all that is the ominous rise of Islamic jihad and a timid, confused response by many Christian leaders.

Along with looking back, we look forward mindful of the growing troubles of this world, and we also look forward to Advent, which tells us about God coming to help us, and then Christmas, which is pointing to Good Friday and Easter, where God solves the problem and then sends his Holy Spirit who leads us and guides us as individuals and Christians together to the end of the next year.

As we know, to speak of "the end" has two meanings. It means termination, and it also means goal. At the end of the church year, as on New Year's Eve, we think of the people who have died this past year. We also think of the fact that things will come to an end for us individually, and that they also come to an end for the whole of creation. God the Creator who made the earth is also the Lord who brings it to an end.

Then there's the end as the goal. The goal for you and me individually is significantly pointed out by the fact that the Lord has made us his own in Baptism. Then there is the fact that we have a goal in him and with the cosmos. After all he is Lord of the whole cosmos. Therefore he brings it all to its fulfillment and goal because he made it.

There is one Lord of heaven and earth beside whom there is no other. He is the great shepherd, spoken of in Ezekiel 34:

"Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. . . . I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness . . . I will feed them . . . I will seek the lost . . . bring back the strayed . . . bind up the crippled . . . strengthen the weak, and the fat and strong I will watch over."

We are more familiar with the tenth chapter of John, the good shepherd chapter, where it says:

“I am the good shepherd. . . . I lay down my life for the sheep. . . . My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.”

The one and only Lord of the cosmos is the good shepherd. The Lordship of the good shepherd is precisely that he is able to bring about both the care and the final goal for each one of us, as well as for all of creation.

We also know the Twenty-Third Psalm, which begins: “The Lord is my shepherd.” He shepherds us. We sometimes don’t think of the fact that in the last two verses of that Psalm, the image changes to that of giving a banquet. “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies; thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows.”

It’s not only that he takes care of us in the valley of deep darkness or the shadow of death, but it is also that he cares for us in the day by day feeding. The Lord’s Supper which we celebrate not only forgives us and gives us life but it is an anticipation and beginning of that great supper, like a wedding feast, that great banquet that is to come. When we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we are taking part in and beginning that great feast.

The other image, which is a statement of the fact of the matter, is that of being Lord. Psalm 95:3 states: “For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.” He is the Lord of Lords and King of kings. We know that and when we hear the phrase “Lord of lords, and King of Kings,” we can’t help but sing that great stanza from Handel’s Messiah.

In Psalm 95 the Lord is our Maker, our Creator, the one who is in charge. When Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15 about the end, he does two significant things. In 1 Corinthians 15:26 he writes: “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” That’s counter-intuitive. That’s against what people commonly think that death is normal, just one of those things. That’s not what God’s plan has been. That’s plan B because of sin, and we remember that sin, death, and the devil are all the same thing.

In his original plan there was to be no death. And when he restores the new creation, death is no more. Then it concludes in 1 Corinthians 15:28: "When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to everyone." The Lord will be Lord. He is Lord, and it is great that we are his because the Lord is Lord and not somebody else.

Finally, it is appropriate to think of the Lord's Prayer. We often take it for granted because we do it so automatically, but as you well know it says "Thy kingdom come." As Luther writes: "God's kingdom comes by itself, without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may also come to us." He goes on in the Large Catechism to say that this is the most important petition because when his kingdom comes that is everything.

The Lord's Prayer goes on to say: "Thy will be done." That's important for us because we basically say: "My will be done." Luther's explanation goes on to say: "To be sure, the good and gracious will of God is done without our prayer, but we pray that it may also be done by us." We celebrate the fact that he is the King who brings in his kingdom and his will is done.

This brings us to the conclusion to the Lord's Prayer: "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." We know that Roman Catholics don't have that ending. That happens to be a matter of textual traditions. Today Catholics go along with Protestants here because of course Catholics also affirm that his is the kingdom and the power and the glory.

As we pray the Lord's Prayer we are confessing and affirming that his is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

It concludes, as we know, with Amen, which means Yes! It is true! We acclaim that God's kingdom and power and glory are forever and ever and so we say Amen.

Or to put it another way, as Paul does in 2 Corinthians 1:20: "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why we utter the Amen through him, to the glory of God."

This is what we celebrate as we come to the end of the whole account from the first of Advent to the end of the church year: Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords, and "all the promises of God find their Yes in him." Amen