

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD. The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Luke 23:33-43

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (409)

This is the last Sunday of the church year. The Reign of Christ Sunday; Christ the King Sunday. It's a tricky one. I tell you this as a preacher.

Not because it's the end. That I get. At the finish of something, you get a sense as to its true form, and its purpose. Which, turns out, isn't always what seems to have been the case at the outset. It's often that I get to the end of the something and realize what I went in it for isn't what I got out of it, that the whole thing (turns out) was about something else altogether.

When I became a hospital chaplain, I only barely was of much use to any patients there, for all sorts of reasons, only one of which was that I found the work frustrating, every relationship crucial but quick, when what I'm made for are relationships that grow in intensity over time. What I did manage to do during my hospital chaplaincy was meet Jesse, which I can only guess I'd not have done otherwise. Now, to say I served as a hospital chaplain in order to meet Jesse is absurd.

But it's also true, from the point of the view of the end of it, which "end" can also mean "purpose" or "aim."

I had a math teacher in high school who loved to make fun of my generation's music. Every pop song of my high school years ended with the fade-out, when the music keeps going just quieter and quieter until it's over. I guess. I mean, you can only guess at that point. Maybe it never ends, it becomes a part of the music of the cosmos.

Fact is every top ten pop song from 1985 ended with the fade-out.

My math teacher mocked this one day—fondly. I really liked this teacher because he seemed to like us. But I felt defensive about my music, though I hadn't really noticed it. I suppose I just thought that's how pop songs were. With Beethoven, you get about 10 endings to every movement. With Duran Duran, it's fade to black.

Now, as an adult for whom the songs of the 80s are as familiar as they are antiquated, I hear what he was hearing. And it is a little nuts. My kids have noticed it too. "Why don't they finish the song?" But maybe there's some comfort in thinking this bit of pop enjoyment goes on forever, the music of the cosmos...

Which is to give it the shape an ending provides.

In Book Club, we finished our latest endeavor. *Gilead* is a quiet book whose poignancy is there from the start, but whose profundity is slow to grow. As a club, we've tended to read a book in portions, and discuss that portion each week. With this one, though, not only was there a sense that we needed to take it week by week, but there's also a decision to have a final meeting when we've finished the reading and now we'll take the book as a whole. Now that we know how it ends, and not just what events make the story end, which was obvious from the outset, but how the ending is brought to fullness, we can consider the full meaning of the story.

This was actually one of the novelties of the novel as a form—that it considered a long and often many-charactered story, and that it eventually brought it all to an end, some conclusion that made the broad sweep of it intelligible and satisfying. There's a theological statement suggested in the form. That however broad and meandering a story may be, it will come to a conclusion and by this it will make new sense.

Christianity would have us understand that such is life—though it's broad and meandering, it will come to a conclusion by which it will make sense, *good* sense.

From the middle, though, it sure can be bewildering.

Seeking after this satisfaction, I remember picking up the novel *The Sense of an Ending*, which, ironically, tragically, didn't stick the landing. And I'd had the sense it would.

So, I get, in theory, why the church year would need to have some formal ending, some formal last Sunday. It's just that it's hard to put into practice, to make manifest in people's lives. It's sort of pretend. I mean, we're ending as of today. But we all know we're about to begin again next Sunday, that this ending and this beginning will be felt as basically nothing. It will be as if nothing's changed at all—because most likely nothing will have. Tomorrow will be a Monday like most others, and this week we'll have Thanksgiving too. And next Sunday, the sanctuary will have new ornament, but other than that will be sort of like this one.

Then there's the fact that it's hard to press upon our experience the notion, the theological assertion, that Christ is King. This is a statement in part meant in contrast. Christ is King, which means no one else is king. But we're people who've never had a king, and I for one don't really want one. I like constitutional democracy, an attempt at governance that relies heavily on human reason, rationale, and consent. Not that I myself am all that highly reasonable or rational, just that I like a public life that relies on those things, more at least than it does on majesty and pomp. The dark mystification that Trump manages to work on his followers isn't something I want any part of, not even (I imagine) in lighter, more positive form.

And of course, the point of Christ as King is that it upends all the assumptions and assertions of any monarch. This is a king who went first into death, at the front lines instead of back home in the throne room while the soldiers did battle and the peasants paid for it. This is a king who didn't reign from on high but from below, from among the lowly, he himself the lowliest of all. Crucified. Crucified after a life of illiteracy, itinerancy, and having produced no children, no offspring or legacy, which was the only way to eternal life, eternal remembrance.

So, I always explain (every year on Christ the King Sunday) how the people had clamored for a king. When they'd made it through the wilderness and settled in the land, when Moses had been their guide and now, upon his death, the judges ruled the people, the people clamored for a king. They wanted to be like the other nations in their neighborhood, who had kings who then had armies and who could then defend their people and their land. The people had this messy, ineffectual governance of judges, while the Lord God was to be their king. But that was all too abstract and easily fought over or confused.

They wanted a king.

So, they pressed upon the prophet Samuel to anoint for them a king. And Samuel went in prayer to the Lord and said he wouldn't do it, that to do it would be to betray the kingship of the Lord. But the Lord said that Samuel should do it, that he should understand the people not as betraying the prophet but as betraying God. But God was okay with that. Really.

Except...

Samuel must tell the people what having a king would entail. God told him, "...you shall also solemnly warn them of the ways of kings."

So, Samuel did. He told them, "This is what a king is good for. He will take your sons and make them either soldiers for his war-making or slaves for his well-being. He will take your daughters and make them either concubines in his harem or slaves in his household. He will take your property for his court and your livestock for his stable; he'll tax you to fill his treasury. Perhaps worst of all, he'll become king instead of the Lord your king, and on the day when you cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, the Lord won't answer you."

And the amazing thing here is that the people agreed to this. These are the terms to which they said, "Yes, please."

I have a friend who's a political theorist at McGill University. He teaches this story from the book of Samuel as an early text in his survey course—not (I think) for its historicity but for its veracity. I mean, isn't that just the way? Love isn't enough; we want power. Grace isn't enough; we want might. Wise judgement isn't enough; we want order and enforcement.

Or maybe it's that we *need* such things.

Christ the King Sunday is to call us back to some truer, more good king, someone whose service as king over the people wouldn't redound to serving himself all the more but would amount to self-giving that this whole world might be forgiven, and remembered, rejoined, reconnected in Paradise.

But, really, the best way into this last Sunday of the church year is to consider how it began. Pope Pius the XI, nearly 100 years ago, instituted it. And maybe you've heard this: that he did so because he was alarmed by the rising tide of ultra-nationalism, especially Fascism in Italy, just beyond the walls of the Vatican. Having established power in 1922, Mussolini was a living contrast to what Pius would see in Christ as King and would also understand as needing to be said, needing to be institutionalized as a holy day in the Church.

If Christ is King, then Mussolini, in all his controlling brutality and dehumanizing cruelty, is not.

But it bears remembering that Pius had another concern in mind when he instituted this holy day. Equal in his mind to the rising tide of ultra-nationalism was the concern of unmoored secularism. Pius proffered this holy day as a corrective to this, as well: secularism as the assumption that there's nothing beyond the known and human-created world to reference for setting your course. A secular world view would have it, among other things, that there's nothing of the absolute that holds the contingencies of history within its frame, within the poles (for example) of good and bad, of right and wrong. Truly, as Hamlet supposed in the 16th century play of the same name, there is (with secularism) neither good nor bad but thinking makes it so.

See, it's really up to *you* to decide what's good or bad. It's really up to your judgment—your whimsical, capricious, moody deciding—about whether something is right or is wrong. There's no ultimate authority on such matters as this. It's up to you, you who are so skilled at justifying yourself, just like I am, just like everyone is.

Have you heard of EA, this new mode of being righteous in the world? It's short for Effective Altruism, and its reasoning is that the brightest and best of any generation would rightly make as much money as humanly possibly as quickly as possible no matter how. This is a highest good, in fact, as long as, after a while of doing that, you just give it all away. You don't have to build wealth by producing something of public value which might also involve employing people for living wages. You can just make a mad dash of grabbing the goods, making them multiply by the magic of the financial markets, as long as you swear that at some time in the near future you'll stop with the hocus-pocus and give it all away, provided there's any reality to it all.

This was the driving mission of the cryptocurrency wizard whose unmoored ways might, because of business bought on loans he provided, take down half of Lenox.

Oops.

Eh, it's all good. He *meant* well.

I imagine you, like me, have no hesitation that ultra-nationalism is indeed a danger, is indeed anathema to the church. What's more, I bet you, like me, have no hesitation that ultra-nationalism is indeed something we of the church should be clear in resisting and vocal in rejecting. What's still more, I bet you, like me, would join the growing chorus of voices condemning so-called Christian nationalism for its being offensive in its nationalism and utterly false in its Christianity.

There is nothing of Christianity in Christian nationalism.

But would you hesitate in critiquing the other of the pope's concern: secularism? The common culture that operates with no reference to anything outside the frame of our own knowing and proving and managing and asserting, that operates as if there is nothing of the absolute, only of the relative, only the truths that we assert as "our truth"?

That's a tougher one.

We're used to being friends with our larger culture. *I'm* used to being friends with my cultural context, this neoliberal order, for the most part. I mean, I'm not looking for a fight. And who am I to say?

Christ the King would press upon us something else. Christ the King would insist that there is a higher authority, and that, though it is good, it is also unmatched by anything of the world.

But doesn't this smack of cultural chauvinism, perhaps even intolerance. I mean, who are we to judge?

I told you it was tricky, and maybe not just for the preacher.

But see, we've run out of time. It's almost over, and we still don't fully know and understand. So, there's something to be said for accepting some things as given. God is love. Christ serves for the sake of love, even when it costs him his own precious life. Jesus gathers us in as a church for purposes of love, and empowers us to discern and live by love through the gift of the Holy Spirit, and by this we have manifest in our lives the otherwise eternal reign of God, which is love, and for which we give thanks and praise, thanks and praise. Our origin and our end, and how we live in between: thanks and praise, thanks and praise. Alleluia, alleluia!

A good place to end.

Thanks be to God.