

“And He Shall Reign Forever and Ever”

Paul’s letter to the Church of Colossae begs the question ... who is in charge ... or what forces are in control? Given the nature of things, it seems that life can “turn on a dime” ... just ask the 91 passengers on the cruise ship Explorer that sunk on Friday in icy waters near the South Shetland Islands! Given the nature of things, it seems that life can spin out of control at the “blink of an eye” ... just ask members of that divorce scarred Maryland family of five caught up in a murder-suicide on Thanksgiving Day! Given the nature of things, it seems that life can rapidly deteriorate like changing weather ... just ask the tens of thousands of people of Bangladesh who at this very moment are barely clinging to life because of a ferocious cyclone ... or even the people of Malibu, California, who once again are running for their life because of more wild fires.

Who is in charge of the forces ... the powers in this life? Politicians? We elect them to office and “we the people” give them power ... power to do good. But do politicians run the world? I think not and I suspect many politicians would agree with me. I recall reading about a newly elected official being interviewed after his first year in office about what a powerful figure he had become. The person humbly admitted: *The first and most difficult thing I had to learn is that I wasn’t in control of anybody or anything. I was essentially powerless, a victim of many forces beyond my control.* Really? Great!

Well, how about the power of the economy? That’s a strange question, I mean, after all, has anyone ever seen the economy? No ... nevertheless, it seems real. We talk about it enough! But essentially the economy is a force beyond our control. The economy dictates the lives of millions of people. The economy can throw millions of people out of work. Its sovereign decrees have pushed thousands of businesses into bankruptcy. The economy has some invisible, yet powerful force beyond our control. The economy, politics, the national mood, investor confidence, voter apathy ... all these are forces beyond our control.

When Paul writes to the Colossians about “the powers” ... mainly that is what he is talking about ... forces beyond our control! Paul says three things about these powers ... these forces. He says all things in this world were made by Christ, through Christ, and for Christ. This world is not a conflict between some bits of good and some areas of unredeemable evil. It is all God’s world. Even “the powers” ... things like “the economy,” “the media,” “consumer confidence,” or “the political situation” ... all are created by God.

Further Paul writes to the Colossians that Jesus Christ came into the world to do business with the powers ... to live where we live ... to confront the powers and to triumph. Jesus faced the powers and tamed them ... defeated them ... so that he might rule ... so that he might have back his whole creation and might give it back to us as he meant it to be. On the cross, Christ defeated the powers, and stripped them of their ultimate power. Now he seeks to reconcile them ... to create a new world by the power of the love of God. This is why today’s scriptures are cast in a celebrative tone. The powers have been put in their place.

And this is why the feast of Christ the King is a part of the church’s lectionary calendar ... a creation of Pope Pious IX in 1925. While the church had always celebrated images of Christ as King, the church in the late 1920s needed it more than ever ... for on the first celebration of Christ the King, Mussolini had been dictator of Italy for three years; a rabble rouser named Hitler had been out of jail for a year; his Nazi party was growing in popularity, and the world lay in a Great Depression.

In this context a time, Pope Pious IX asserted that, “nevertheless, Christ is King of the universe.” The feast became the church’s great “nevertheless” to the godlessness of the modern world. Despite the risen dictators, despite the widespread modern notion that religion was now a “private affair,” the celebration of Christ the King asserted that “nevertheless” Jesus Christ is Lord and he shall reign forever and ever.

I, more than most, know that tears never satisfy people as far as an explanation for a tragedy. People always want more. People want to know why. We demand reasons. We are consumed with speculations. We rush to conclusions, in order to pin the blame on something or someone: “pilot error” ... “system malfunction.” But even these aren’t reasons ... nor do psychological counselors have answers sufficient to that awesome question ... who is in charge here? Who has things under control? If you or I could manage to get through life, hermetically sealed from chaos ... safe in some neatly manicured yard ... insured ... secure ... then we would never ask who’s in charge. And therefore we would never need to sing the hymns we are singing today ... never need to know Christ the King.

I, more than most, have had to look into the eyes of so many who have grieved over the death of a loved one, and have had to face that ultimate question more times than I care to: Why? Why did this happen? Who is in charge? Where is God in all this? And I confess that at many gravesides, words have failed me. After the benediction, I often have nothing more say. I simply lean on the priest’s words to the widow in Brother’s Karamov when faced with a great loss: *Be not consoled, consolation is not what you need ... only weep!*

And so I hug people and cry with them. Over time, I have learned that at such times words are quite meaningless. Presence ... being *with* those who grieve, standing *with* them in their grief, feeling their pain is really all I can do! The fact is ... we humans are not in charge. However, Christ the King is! "Nevertheless," ... we are not without hope. We cling to Paul's words: *(Christ) is the image of the invisible God ... whether thrones or dominion or rulers or powers --- all things have been created through him and for him ... in him all things hold together.*

Jesus Christ is the glue! And because of this truth, we are able to gather at funerals and sing with tears in our eyes: *The strife is o'er, the battle done, the victory of life is won, Alleluia!* We are able to sing such a defiant "Alleluias" because, nevertheless, we know who won the war.

Let none of us deny the pain of grief, the wreckage, ruin and rubble that afflicts many in this life, in this world, in this community, in this church. The pain is real, the questions are large, the answers don't come easily, and the defeat is more than merely apparent. Nevertheless, we have courage in the battle; we manage to go on even after our defeats, for we know who sits on the throne: *(Christ) is the image of the invisible God ... whether thrones or dominion or rulers or powers -- all things have been created through him and for him ... in him all things hold together.*

Jesus Christ is the glue! The kingdoms of this world may totter and sway. Nevertheless, one realm endures. Plans for human betterment rise and dribble off to nothing. Nevertheless, humanity is not without hope." We go off to work in our cars, off to school in our buses ... we fly here, we go there --- but we never know when our own world might be shaken down to its foundations and we become terribly dislocated. Nevertheless, it is a great comfort, in times when our life becomes unglued, and we feel very vulnerable ... to know who is in charge: Christ the King rules!

Instead of asking who is in charge, we would best be served by asking, who is Jesus Christ for us today? "He is the image of the invisible God." He is a king in the sense of God's sovereignty. It is a kingship of the reality and power of the spirit of God. He rules. The world is his throne. When Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God, he meant the end of the present world and the arrival of the "new world." Jesus referred to the Kingdom both as present and as coming in the near future. Because the future coming was so near, the Kingdom was also present.

When one of the criminals flanking Jesus on the Cross said, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom; Jesus replied ... **today** you will be with me in Paradise." God's Kingdom is both present and future. In Christ, God is in charge. "Whether thrones or dominion or rulers or powers --- all things have been created through him for him." Therefore, Jesus Christ is our hope! He is God made visible for us! He rules and is in charge. He is the glue that holds the kingdom together while the world is in chaos. He is the one who died for us despite our sinful nature, for "Christ died for the ungodly." Alleluia!

Yes! Christ is our "alleluias" in a world that leaves us speechless. Christ is the King, who rules from the Cross, who sits upon the throne, who is in charge, and strives to restore peace among the people, as well as spiritual peace within our souls. Who is Jesus Christ for us today? He is the One to whom we reach out when we are being crucified by this world. He is the One to whom we pray, asking that he remember us. And he is the one who says to you and me "... today ... (today) you will be with me in Paradise."

In our daily skirmishes with evil, we can live with hope and confidence. We can act faithfully and live with courage. Although the battles may be tough, we already know who has won the war. That knowledge, the knowledge we have been transformed to the kingdom of God's beloved Son ... the knowledge that the powers of death and evil no longer hold us in their tight grip ... that knowledge enables us to live with courage and hope. The battle of life has been won. Now it is up to us to live like it! Amen!

Prayer: Lord, we have problems with powers. So many times, modern life has ways of making us feel more like a number than a name. We feel jerked around by forces over which we have no control. Unseen forces appear to hold us captive. Grant us, good Lord, to see your hand in the events of the day. Enable us to know Your rule, and your kingdom, and your power. Keep reminding us that we are not citizens of this world, but of your world, your kingdom. Keep telling us that the future is in your hands, that you are working behind the scenes in history to bring all things unto yourself, and that you will keep working until your kingdom is come in power and glory. Lord Jesus, we need you to rule, to rule in our world and in our lives, now and forever. Amen.