

The Dark, Bold, Strong Dogma of the Kingdom

- *Christ the King*
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Each morning when I get up at an ungodly hour; after I've crept sleepy-eyed downstairs in Arrupe in my pajamas to start the first pot of coffee—dark, bold, strong, French roast; after I've showered; started the second pot of all-day wimpy blend coffee; thrown out the previous day's newspapers; brought in the new papers from the doorstep; scanned the front pages of USA Today, The New York Times and The Seattle Times; deboned the latter of ads to get to the business section, local news, and how the Redhawks have fared the night before; after all that I drop into my recliner chair, kick up the footrest, ready to make the day godly and settle into an hour of Jesuit prayer powered by bold, dark, strong, French roast coffee; then I start praying by placing before me an icon of Christ standing upon his cross and pulling Adam, Eve, and all of us into risen bodily life.

Why do I do that? I start there because I am helped by knowing where it is all going, where I am going, what is the final chapter of my life and the universe's life. No matter what I face that day, it is helpful to know what the end of the story is. It gives me hope. I'll be pulled from death into resurrected, bodily, fully-at-last-Steve life with Christ in a recreated universe together with my brothers and sisters in their transformed humanity and at last fully-realized identity. Wow! That's where it's all going. That is the last chapter. Whether it's because of the bold, dark, strong, French roast coffee or this icon image of the end, I'm ready to pray and to face any day and anything.

Today is the last Sunday of the revolving Sunday Masses of the year. Next week we start over with the first Sunday of Advent, the first dawn of the hope for what we celebrate in its fullness today. Today's solemnity is called "Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe". Next week is the introduction to chapter one; today is the final chapter. I believe it helps us immensely to know where we are going, to get it straight, because knowing where we are going helps us go in the right direction, helps us to recognize the milestones along the way, the pointers to the destination, helps us to know what kind of gear to take along, where to climb, to put our energy, when to sweat and when to pause to enjoy along the way. Only if we know where we are going can we know how to get there.

Where we are going is called the Kingdom of God. It was the one thing Jesus never tired talking about and showing in all he did. Kingdom. It is the one thing bigger and more important than the Church, that for which the Church exists, proclaims, helps the people of God attain. Kingdom. It is where not only we, but this earth and the universe itself, all of creation is going, not a dissipation of the big bang but the big Hallelujah of a transformed universe with Christ as the King of that Universe—which we celebrate today—and all of this handed over and held by God. Kingdom.

Somewhere along the line most of us got this quite wrong. The promise of Christ was that he will return to this Earth, that he will raise us bodily, recreated, at last fully ourselves and fully what we were meant to be, united together with him and with one another on this actual Earth, which itself will be transformed. This bold, earthly, bodily, concrete promise—this last chapter—got waylaid and weakened between the Bible and now by something called “heaven”, which together with the Greek idea of the “immortality of the soul”, yielded a final chapter in our minds of a place of souls or spirits, disembodied, angelic, somewhere up there rather than down here. What a wimpy, final chapter, as bad as that wimpy all-day blend of coffee, not bold, not dark, not strong, not powering prayer or action, not a vision to get us going, wrong. Jesus did not preach or promise heaven; he preached, promised, and manifested in himself the beginning of and an ultimate Kingdom of God, of recreated persons on a recreated earth. The “Kingdom of Heaven” in the gospels means simply “God’s realm”, not something in the heavens. Once our minds got polluted with this ethereal idea of heaven, it has been nearly impossible to shake it. But we must try to do so.

There is an in-between condition after death and before Christ establishing the Kingdom on earth, raising us up bodily, making us and the earth anew. That in-between condition in the bible is simply called “being with Christ”, or “asleep in Christ”, kept safe or in safekeeping in him for the final reality of the Kingdom. I believe it is best to think of this inbetween condition as an “inn along the way”, an inn where we are safe with Christ, resting up for being led by him to the kingdom. If it helps, this in-between condition has been described by someone as if, “God will download our software onto his hardware until the time when he gives us new hardware to run the software again”. [N.T. Wright, Surprised by Hope, p.163, based on J. Polkinghorne.] If that helps, fine; if not, forget it. The Church teaches that this in-between condition after death but before the kingdom on earth “is beyond all understanding and description. Scripture speaks of it in images: life, light, peace, wedding feast, wine of the kingdom, the father’s house, the heavenly Jerusalem, paradise...” [Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1027.] It is important because it is about our conscious continuity and identity beyond death, but it is not where we are going; rather it is the next to last chapter of our story.

The Church teaches that the final chapter is something quite different:

“At the end of time, the Kingdom of God will come in its fullness. After the universal judgment, the righteous will reign forever with Christ, glorified in body and soul. The universe itself will be renewed... Sacred Scripture calls this mysterious renewal, which will transform humanity and the world, “new heavens and a new earth”. It will be the definitive realization of God’s plan to bring under a single head “all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth”. [Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1042-43.]

That’s the bold vision, the real promise, the final chapter, where we are going, where everything is going. We must act decisively and daily to counteract the image of the end being “immortal souls in heaven”, an image which is deeply embedded in our minds, culture, and Church. It is the power of the truly bold, earthly promise—nothing less—which we celebrate on this culminating Sunday of “Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe”. The final Sunday is about the final universe and its King.

What a difference keeping this assured final chapter in mind makes. A difference:

- in prayer,
- in hope,
- in love of one another,
- in working for justice with all,
- in treasuring and caring for our bodies and the bodies of others,
- in love of our universe and the science which reveals it,
- in care for our planet,
- in the Eucharistic community representing and on its way to the Kingdom,
- in a fully embodied hope for our beloved who have died,
- in seeing the Church as the sacrament of the Kingdom,
- in accepting the call of Christ our king to build his kingdom of peace, compassion, kindness, justice, beauty, and love.

If you do not believe me that this is what we should be about, just ask Pope Francis, because it is clear that he is about the kingdom.

Let us drink this bold, dark, strong dogma of the kingdom on this day and see how it wakes us to a new godly day.