

The End is Here
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Colossians 1:1-20 Common English Bible (CEB, inclusive language)

1 From Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will, and Timothy our brother.

2 To the holy and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae. Grace and peace to you from God.

3 We always give thanks to God, when we pray for you. 4 We've done this since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and your love for all God's people. 5 You have this faith and love because of the hope reserved for you in heaven. You previously heard about this hope through the true message, the good news, 6 which has come to you. This message has been bearing fruit and growing among you since the day you heard and truly understood God's grace, in the same way that it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world. 7 You learned it from Epaphras, who is the fellow slave we love and Christ's faithful minister for your sake. 8 He informed us of your love in the Spirit.

9 Because of this, since the day we heard about you, we haven't stopped praying for you and asking for you to be filled with the knowledge of God's will, with all wisdom and spiritual understanding. 10 We're praying this so that you can live lives that are worthy of God and pleasing in every way: by producing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God; 11 by being strengthened through God's glorious might so that you endure everything and have patience; 12 and by giving thanks with joy to God, who made it so you could take part in the inheritance, in light granted to God's holy people. 13 God rescued us from the control of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the beloved Son. 14 God set us free through the Son and forgave our sins.

15 The Son is the image of the invisible God,
the one who is first over all creation,

16 Because all things were created by him:
both in the heavens and on the earth,
the things that are visible and the things that are invisible.

Whether they are thrones or powers,
or rulers or authorities,
all things were created through him and for him.

17 He existed before all things,
and all things are held together in him.

18 He is the head of the body, the church,
who is the beginning,
the one who is firstborn from among the dead
so that he might occupy the first place in everything.

19 Because all the fullness of God was pleased to live in him,
20 and he reconciled all things to himself through him—
whether things on earth or in the heavens.
He brought peace through the blood of his cross.

The End is Near. I'm sure you've seen that sign at least once in your life. Usually, a sandwich board worn by someone on a street corner or simply a sign by someone protesting rallies about LGBTQ or reproductive rights. Today, I'm here to tell you that the end isn't near – it's here. I'm speaking liturgically, of course. You didn't think I meant literally, did you?

We follow this Christian Church cycle every year, starting approximately in December and continuing through November. Next week is Advent, the beginning of the church calendar, waiting and expectation for the Messiah, for the Christ. We continue onto the seasons of Christmastide, Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, Lent, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter and ordinary time until we reach the end – which is today.

It's called, Reign of Christ Sunday.

Actually, it has several names:

- The Feast of Christ the King
- The Solemnity of our Lord Jesus Christ
- King of the Universe Sunday
- Christ the King Sunday

This celebration in the Western Liturgical Calendar was officially added in 1925 by Pope Pius XI, saying, "If to Christ our Lord is given all power in heaven and on earth; if all [humanity], purchased by his precious blood, are by a new right subjected to his dominion; if this power embraces all [humanity], it must be clear that not one of our faculties is exempt from his empire. He must reign in our minds, which should assent with perfect submission and firm belief to revealed truths and to the doctrines of Christ. He must reign in our wills, which should obey the laws and precepts of God. He must reign in our hearts, which should spurn natural desires and love God above all things and cleave to him alone. He must reign in our bodies and in our members, which should serve as instruments for the interior sanctification of our souls, or to use the words of the Apostle Paul, as instruments of justice unto God."¹

There is **A LOT** being said here, which I could analyze quite thoroughly and specifically. But that would take a long time and neither you, nor I want to endure that today.

¹ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_11121925_quas-primas_en.html

Pope Pius XI offered these words in his encyclical, *Quas Primas*, to all of the bishops at that time to relay them to their respective churches. Let me highlight some things which I think are important.

- IF as Christians we accept Jesus' death and resurrection for our eternal salvation
- IF as Christians we believe in following the teachings and examples of Jesus
- THEN Jesus and the way MUST reign
 - in our minds
 - in our wills
 - in our hearts
 - in our bodies
- AND it must be done NOW and for all eternity

Europe after World War I, the war that was to end all wars, was not like it is today. The continent was geographically different. Not only were the borders different, but names of the nations were different. The area was very different economically and politically. Following the war, the European continent was devastated. Refugees were present everywhere; economic collapse for many nations, especially Germany, was a very real possibility. The Great Depression, which hit the United States in 1929, began 10 years earlier in Europe, creating runaway inflation in many places. The image of one carrying a wheelbarrow full of money to market so as to buy a few groceries was not that far from the reality of the day.

Such disastrous conditions required solutions. Human solutions, since they are tangible and readily available, were the most attractive to those who sought answers to the dilemma that plagued their lives. Thus, governments and their leaders offered various plans. In Italy, the solution attempted was the dictatorship of Mussolini and the fascist state. In Germany, Adolf Hitler and his nascent Nazi machine were already making overtures that would lead to his grasping power in the mid-1930s.

In light of all of this, the Pope, perceiving a need to rebuild confidence and hope which had been shattered by the war, sought answers in the realm of the sacred rather than the human or secular. He wanted to remind people that it was Jesus Christ who was King. And it was Jesus, the son of God, who would provide peace and security and ultimately reign, over everything.

In many ways our world is not that much different than Europe after World War I. Many countries throughout the world teeter on the verge of economic collapse. In countries such as Hungary, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Poland, Australia, England, Turkey and the United States, there is a growing attitude of warped nationalism, coming from a fear of losing sovereignty, on *having* to potentially rely on other nations. An attitude of despair and lack of hope is on the rise in many places. We create our human kings and non-human solutions to alleviate these

problems that beset us. Dictators and selfish rulers come to power, but they bring little hope to people.

We make many things king, but unfortunately, they are not Christ. For some the great king is the material world. We become fixated on material possessions. They become the reason for our efforts. We work to amass things, rather than becoming rich in the sight of God. For others the great king is power, independence and authority. When we secure power we feel we can move mountains and accomplish all things without the assistance of others. Global support and cooperation are replaced with “our interest first, who cares about others.” As the expression goes, power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Still others find prestige to be their king. Some live to be recognized for their appearance, intelligence, accomplishments or contributions to society. We take all the credit for what happens and fail to acknowledge and thank God, the source of all that we have.

There are some as well who find ideas and causes to be king. We become so ingrained in the righteousness or the justice of a belief or cause that nothing else seems to matter. Again, God gets lost in the shuffle.

The choice between the sacred and the secular, between God and the world is one we must make everyday. We are driven to excel in the here and now. We are taught almost from birth to build up our treasure and to become rich in the eyes of the world. When the material world captures us we are, as Paul describes in 1 Corinthians, “people most to be pitied.”

So, in the end, who do we choose to follow?

The kingship of Christ, the Messiah, was different from what was expected. Jeremiah proclaimed, “The days are 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 security” (Jer. 23:5-6a). Micah told the Hebrews that the Messiah would be great and through him Judah would rest secure (5:2-5). The Messiah would vanquish the enemies of Israel and restore the greatness of the Davidic Kingdom.

Jesus of Nazareth was not recognized as a king because he did not fit the mold of Messiah and king as it was understood to be. Jesus was a miracle worker, healer, reconciler, teacher and prophet. He calmed storms, cured lepers, forgave sinners, taught a significant message of love and prophesied his future death and resurrection. He did many great things and touched many people, but how could he be the Messiah – he did not do the work of the Messiah, as foretold in the scriptures.

Jesus was certainly a different kind of king. His reign had been predicted in the Hebrew scriptures, but somehow the message of his righteousness and justice wasn't heard or it got misconstrued. In Isaiah 9:6-7, the prophet prophesied, "A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be vast authority and endless peace for David's throne and for his kingdom, establishing and sustaining it with justice and righteousness now and forever." The prophecies and resulting realities of Jesus' reign as a servant leader, a suffering slave, and sacrificing himself for others, weren't characteristic of a king.

Luke 23:33-43, Jesus is crucified at Golgotha between two criminals or bandits. One mocked him, "Aren't you the Messiah? Come on, save yourself and us!" A powerful leader, the Messiah, a king, was supposed to be powerful - capable of moving mountains, capable of ruling. But this guy was weak. All he's got is compassion and love! Who needs a king like that? What does that get you - killed, that's what! The other criminal says, "No! We're condemned justly, but what's he done to deserve this?" This second bandit seems to get Jesus' revolutionary leadership qualities. Jesus said, "today, you will be with me in Paradise."

Who was Jesus talking to? You know, it's not clear that it's specifically to the one or the other of those prisoners to either side of him. We believe Jesus told the "repentant" criminal that he'd see Jesus in paradise because it's hard for us to think Jesus would say that to the indignant criminal, right? But, honestly Jesus could have said it to either. And, if we're talking about a king whose reign went against everything that OUGHT to be associated with an earthly king - power, military might, dominance, wealth - wouldn't it fit Jesus' character that he might be SO REVOLUTIONARY as to welcome BOTH of the criminals in paradise?

The crucifixion, as Luke writes it, illustrated the sobering reality of who Jesus was and what he came to accomplish. Jesus was mocked for being a paper lion, a king who possessed no power. He was ridiculed with the inscription "King of the Jews." He wasn't the image of a king. He was nothing like it. He re-defined everything thought to be "kingly."

And that's who we choose to celebrate - a crucified king, triumphant on the cross.

In the midst of chaos and dissent, what hope is there for the future? The Colossians were asking that question. In post World War I, many Europeans were asking that question. Today, the question is being asked, still.

In what direction are we headed as a nation, as a species? Division, anger, poverty and fighting are increasing rapidly. When we see God's creation struggling all around us, we seek to know what hope there might be for our children, our grandchildren and beyond?

We turn to the sacred.

We celebrate the Reign of Christ “because all the fullness of God was pleased to live in him.” Love, pure and unconditional, overcame death so that Love will always be first in everything.

It’s the end!

The answer to our questions about this life and eternal life is found in the Christ Hymn. That’s the name for verses 15-20 from today’s reading. These verses are actually an ancient Christian Hymn that Paul didn’t write himself but added into his letter to the Colossians. This hymn was probably already being sung or recited by those in the church at that time. In it is the reminder that the Christ is the image of the invisible God. That image of the reign-dom of God is both reassuring and inspiring. All of creation, in heaven and on earth, visible or invisible, is because of the Christ. Christ the King was loving, compassionate and merciful. That is what existed from the very beginning and will exist until Until the end. So, we choose love – may it reign forever and forever.

AMEN.