

Christ the King and the Unveiling of his Kingly Order – Mathias Zahniser

Daniel 7:9-10, 13, 14; Revelation 1:4b-8; Psalm 93; John 18:33-37

When our children were young our family traveled to Ann's parents for many holidays. Once when we arrived at their house our five-year-old son David made a bee line for the kitchen where Ann's mother was preparing a meal and asked, "Who's in charge here?" Note that he asked this question in the kitchen, suggesting two key insights about order: he assumed a mom was in charge; and he had learned when you change kitchens you change leadership. Or in kingdom language, when you change kingdoms, you change kings.

The last Sunday of the church year, the Sunday before Advent, we focus on who is in charge: it is Christ the King Sunday and our lectionary readings focus on the Kingship of Jesus. Remember when we talk about kingdom here, we are not talking about a place—not a realm but a rule—a divine order that can prevail in any place, and will eventually prevail in every place. As Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." It is not unlike David's family order. His parents order should prevail everywhere, even in his grandparent's kitchen, though this might require some cooperation, and maybe some negotiation.

After Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost Sunday are over we celebrate Trinity Sunday because the Father has by then given the Son and the Spirit to the Church. We then spend the next 29 Sundays learning how to live more effectively as individuals and as a faith community under the order of our triune God, and with the help of the Spirit following the teachings and example of our king Jesus.

Frankly, however, much remains unfulfilled and we do not see a world in which the Jesus we know appears to be in charge. So, at the end of the year we find ourselves looking to the end of the age—to the future hope that Christ's kingship will ultimately prevail.

Related selections from Daniel and Revelation frame our gospel reading, in their unique way, offering assurance that the Son of Man who participates in God's identity, shares God's rule, and reveals God's order is still on the throne. So let's take a little time to talk about the visions of Daniel and Revelation. What I might call

The Unveiling of the King's Credentials

These visions are typical of a type of literature called apocalyptic, meaning "revelational." The Greek word *apokalúptō*, means "to unveil." It includes the verb *kalúptō*, meaning "to veil," and

the prefix *apo-* meaning *un* in English—like the *un* in to **un**friend, a verb Oxford scholar Christine Lindberg added to *The New Oxford American Dictionary* just this year. To “unfriend” means “to remove someone as a friend on . . . [for example] Facebook.” For those of you who like to play with words, I digress to tell you Lindberg, a lexicographer, claims that “unfriend” has “lex appeal.”² Anyway, apocalyptic is a type of literature that “unveils” the hidden whether present or future. ¹ [notes at the end of the document]

Because Christ the King Sunday involves end-time thinking—whether end of the church year or end of the age—let’s think about apocalyptic literature.

Daniel 7 starts with “Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed” (v. 1). Apocalyptic literature features dream-like symbolic images readers frequently find hard to understand unless they know the traditional imagery of such literature.

In his night vision Daniel sees “one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven” (13a). Early Christians who heard our reading from Revelation knew well the Jewish scripture. When they heard Revelation read with its “Look! He is coming with the clouds,” they thought of Daniel’s vision.

They would also think of Jesus because Daniel’s phrase, “one like a human being coming in the clouds of heaven,” literally means “one like a son of humanity coming in the clouds of heaven.” The phrase in Aramaic can be a polite way of referring to oneself; it can mean a human person, or it can refer to the apocalyptic figure in Daniel and Revelation. With two exceptions where the crowd quotes Jesus (John 12:34a, b), he alone refers to himself as “the son of humanity.”³ Now listen to Daniel 7:14 as Christians heard it.

[Jesus] was given dominion
and glory and kingship,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
that shall not pass away,
and his kingship is one
that shall never be destroyed.⁴

Think of this as a statement of Jesus’ credentials! This is what both of our visions are all about: Christ the King.

New Testament readers did not take it literally that Jesus would descend from heaven floating on clouds. Rather, modern apocalypticism—notice the *ism*—that has “produced a less fully biblical picture, with Jesus flying around like a spaceman and the physical world being destroyed.”⁵

Apocalypticism produced the detailed pamphlet I found last week at a soccer match, headlined: “The End of the World is Almost Here! Holy God Will Bring Judgment Day on May 21, 2011.”⁶ Apocalyptic literature is symbolic like visions and dreams. Apocalypticism takes it literally as though it were like the book of Acts. For example, the Revelation is loaded with images of warfare and violence, yet its Christian readers and hearers eschewed killing of any kind.⁷ Obviously they took the militarism of the book symbolically—not literally.

Such Christianity prevailed until the time of Constantine, the fourth century Emperor of the Roman Empire who decided to carry out his imperial conquests under the banner of the cross and to establish Christianity as the imperial religion. His mother, Helen, a devout Christian, on a visit to Jerusalem, thought she found the true cross. She sent the nails that had been embedded in the cross to Constantine who “had them melted down into a bit for his war horse.”⁸

One more thing about the future coming of the King and his kingdom promised by apocalyptic scripture: It is very important politically. It guards against utopian political movements. A utopian movement believes that its ideology, if fully and consistently implemented, will bring in the good life for all: Communism, Wahhabi or Jihadi Islam, movement Conservatism; Ayn Rand’s radical individualism. When such movements fail, their advocates usually blame their followers for compromising the message and flubbing its application. To prevent failure their leaders may turn to dictatorial and coercive ways of making it work. Ayn Rand, for example, whose 1000 page book *Atlas Shrugged* has sold more than 6 million copies, taught that through the unfettered freedom of the individual the good life will emerge for all. With her own disciples, however, she was very dictatorial and controlling.⁹ Realizing that the truly good world will only arrive with the coming of Son of Man will protect us from the destructive tendencies of utopian political ideologies.

In short the book of Revelation supported by the book of Daniel unveils the cosmic credentials of Jesus the Son of Humanity, Messiah as King, placing him on the throne of the Ancient of Days, and assuring us that his order will eventually prevail.

The opening of our short reading from Revelation enhances our knowledge of the credentials of our King. It describes Jesus as “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth . . . who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us . . . a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father. . . .” (1:4b-6). But I fear less that we will ignore our King’s credentials than that we will ignore our King’s mission. So now let us turn to

Carrying out of our King’s Mission.

The gospel reading looks in on Pilate’s first interview of Jesus as part of his trial. “Are you the king of the Jews?” Pilate wants to know (John 18:33). Jesus insists that his “kingdom is not from this world,” otherwise his “followers would be fighting” (36). No, he says, “my kingdom is not from here” (36). “So you are a king?” Pilate asks. Now notice where Jesus goes from here:

You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice. (18:37)

His own statement of his mission is “to testify to the truth.” Pilate throws up his hands and asks “what is truth?” But Jesus—if we use the lens of Christ the King Sunday—shows that his message is to reveal the true nature of God and God’s order. Indeed it is clear that the Order or Kingdom of God “forms the heart of Jesus’ teaching . . . and is confirmed by his mighty works.”

Jesus presented himself as the Son of Humanity “the Ideal Adam” or Human.¹⁰ He often referred to God as his father and to himself as the son. Twice in Mark a voice from Heaven declares him Son of God (Mark 1:11; 9:7).

This means that Jesus as the word become flesh, God born human, lives out in the Spirit the life God designs, the life Adam and Eve failed to live; and the life we humans generally fail to live. Through his teaching and his example, in the Spirit, Jesus reveals the order and priorities of God. He participates in the identity of God. He also participates in the human community. By taking up his cross in solidarity with us he lives for us the authentic faithfulness we long for; in taking up our cross by faith in solidarity with him we participate in his journey of salvation from his cradle to his ascension.¹¹

Let me close with two stories. The fruitful working of God’s order in each can be discerned by means of the revelatory journey of Jesus “who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father” (Revelation 1:6).

First: The sacrifice of two individuals transforms a community.

Sometimes the fruitful working out of God’s order is obvious as in this case reported by Ernest Gordon of the transformation of a work camp in Thailand where he was incarcerated during World War II. He and the others in this work camp endured merciless subjection to hard work building a bridge over the River Kwai. They did this work under conditions of poor and insufficient food, lack of care for rampant illness, and harsh punishment for minor infractions of the many rules. For example, listening to the radio was punishable by death.

As things got worse and worse miserable men started turning to God out of fear; they begged God for release from captivity, for healing from illness, and for food and rest. When nothing changed, they gave up their appeal to God and gave way to despair. Some died from the drying up of their will to live; others committed suicide or tried to; the rest plodded on day after day.

The actions of two men turned the camp around. One man’s mucker lay ill. A mucker is a buddy with whom one shared everything. Angus decided his mucker would not die. He gave him his own meager rations of food; he even joined a black-market gang to obtain more food. He cared for him night and day when he wasn’t required to work. His friend finally recovered. Angus died of starvation and exhaustion. He literally laid down his life for his friend.

The other event resulted from the loss of a shovel. The captors regularly took inventory of the tools used for prisoners' work on the bridge. One inspection found a shovel missing. The guards, certain it had been taken by one of the prisoners, maybe for sale on the black market, lined them all up and demanded at gun point for the thief to step forward. No one moved. Time passed; no one moved. Finally, when the guard said he would shoot them all if no one confessed, a man from among them stepped forward. The guard unloaded his rifle on him and the victim slumped to his death. I say "victim" because soon afterwards the shovel was found. It had just been misplaced.

Ernest Gordon was an agnostic journalist when he entered this death camp. Along with many others in the camp he came to faith in God largely as a result of these two examples. He discovered that faith in God did not deliver the prisoners from captivity and its agonies; but it provided them with the faith to go through it. They started a school. Inmates taught what they knew to others who wanted to learn. They made musical instruments with available materials and formed an orchestra. They put together chapel services.

Both men laid down their life for others, a powerful feature of Jesus' participational journey in solidarity with us. They lit the candle of the divine Order. And it set the prisoners free to be a community of faith.

Ernest Gordon who became a chaplain at Princeton University tried his best to keep track of the survivors of that camp and discovered that most of them were involved in human services.¹²

Second: A flock of birds and a mouse transform the life of a troubled woman.

The representative journey of Jesus in the Spirit illuminates the working of God's grace even when no one seems to notice it. Sally Carrighar, one of the twentieth century's great nature writers tells her agonizing story in, *Home to the Wilderness*.¹³ In her opening chapter, "The Blast Furnace.," she narrates her childhood with a mother who appears to hate her, criticizes her, and intimidates her with frequent repetitions of, "It is likely that many people who seem to die natural deaths have in fact been poisoned by their families" (221). Her mother even tried to strangle her.

Sally grew up with her own bouts of depression, weakness, and anxiety. Her ambition from early in her life was to become a writer. But as she improved in her writing, her creative fiction turned out grotesque and ugly. She abandoned all hope of being a creative writer. She had earlier hoped to be a concert pianist and had developed the required technical skills; but she lacked the strength that vocation required. So abandoning writing was a second agonizing disappointment.

Once while battling despair and confined to her bed by low blood pressure, Sally began trying to attract a flock of linnets to her flower box just outside a window near her bed. Finding she had a

certain rapport with these birds, she attracted them into her apartment with seeds. The birds got so fond of her they would perch in her apartment in groups.

One evening about 10, while listening to classical music on her radio, she heard a gentle melodic, birdlike, singing along with the music. Since the birds were all perched for the night at ten o'clock, she thought her memory of their songs lingered with her in some strange way. She writes,

At least that was the explanation that seemed logical in the beginning, when birdlike or flutelike notes accompanied all the solos and symphonies. But I began to doubt that the sweet obbligato was only in my imagination for the melodies also carried on through the announcer's talk; and then the new songs were continuing after I'd turned off the radio for the night. Lying there in the dark I would listen gratefully and with growing wonder to the small song, which would trill out of the radio for at least ten or fifteen minutes after the other music was silent (273).

One night she turned on the light and moved the radio away from the wall only to see a mouse scampering out and away from the radio. Could it be a singing mouse? she wondered. Do mice sing? The following morning she contacted the University of California's Zoology Department and discovered that, "yes, very occasionally there were singing mice" (274). She was born again.

I had to get out of bed, she writes, and walk up and down because of a thought so startling and so exciting: this is what I should write about! Birds and animals! . . . My whole future life burst open that night like some great and beautiful flower. . . . (274-75).

Healing and liberation were major features of Jesus' journey of solidarity with us: the blind saw, the deaf heard, the lame walked, the dead were raised, and the gospel was preached to the poor. Can anyone doubt that Jesus had his hand in Sally's resurrection?

The French philosopher Blaise Pascal has been quoted as saying, "nothing is ever known properly until it is known in relation to Jesus Christ."¹⁴ Maybe one vocation of the followers of Jesus is to "unveil" the hidden work of Christ the King by living as witnesses to the truth. Jesus who loves us and sets us free came to bear witness to the truth!

Notes

1. This information about the word *apokalúptō* can be found in Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2 vols. (New York NY: United Bible Societies, 1988), 1: 23.28; 28.79; 79.114; 89.122.
2. St. Louis Post-Dispatch, November 18, A8.
3. I. Howard Marshall, "Son of Man," in *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. by Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 775-81. I used "son of humanity" in this sermon because the Greek word

anthropos, not only means “a man” (Mark 1:23 NRSV) but also, if used generically to refer to men and women, means humanity (Mark 2:27 NRSV; note the use of the definite article to indicate the generic meaning, ho anthropos). Therefore it seems appropriate to speak of Jesus as “the son of humanity,” even though NRSV has Son of Man (Mark 2:28).

4. Other Jewish writers of the New Testament period, for example Parables of Enoch, associated Daniel’s “one like a son of man” with “the Messiah [of Isaiah 11:1-5]” (Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008], 231).
5. N. Thomas Wright, *The Millennium Myth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999). 43; a more complete and very helpful discussion of this crucial topic occurs in Wright’s *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), chs. 8 and 11.
6. www.familyradio.com.
7. See David W. Bercot, *The Early Christian View of War* (Tyler, TX: Scroll Publishing Company, 1994). The Free Methodist Church of North America has this to say about war in their 2003 Book of Discipline (34700 B, page 67): “We believe that military aggression, as an instrument of national policy is indefensible (Isaiah 2:3-4). The destruction of life and property and the deceit and violence necessary to warfare are contrary to the spirit and mind of Jesus Christ (Isaiah 9:6-7; Matthew 5:44-45). It is, therefore, our duty as Christians to promote peace and goodwill, to foster understanding and mutual trust among all people, and to work with patience for the renunciation of war as a means to settle international disputes (Romans 12:18; 14:19).
8. Jaraslov Pelikan, in an interview with Krista Tippett, “Speaking of Faith,” October 25, 2009, ©American Public Media (www.sof.org).
9. Mark Sanford, “Ayn Rand: Atlas Hugged,” *Newsweek*, November 2, 2009, 55). Somewhere I picked up this quote from Reinhold Niebuhr, “history does not contain the seeds of its own fulfillment.” That is, it can only be fulfilled when the kingly order of God comes in the last days under the leadership of the Son of Humanity himself. I am looking for the source of the quote.
10. William Jennings, *Lexicon to the Syriac New Testament (Peshitta)*, Revised by Ulric Gantillon (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1962), 40: “bareh d’nāshā [the Son of Humanity] “the prophetic title used exclusively 39 [times] (excluding parallels) in Gospels [sic] of Christ as the Ideal Adam, summing up mankind restored, Mk. ii 28 or 40; DJG).
11. I have taken the language of this paragraph from Clark H. Pinnock’s rendering (*Flame of Love*[Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996], 91-108) of the first theory of the atonement, that of Irenaeus’ (130?-202?) recapitulation theory of the Atonement in *Against Heresies* 5.14 (A.D. 185): “God sent his Son in the power of the Spirit to enact a recapitulation of human history through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, which would give the human race a new start” (95). “In order to confront the world with the rule of God,” according to Pinnock, “Jesus walked into the eye of the storm. . . . The Spirit led him a long path in which wrath, pain and evil become absorbed by the heart of the suffering Servant King. . . . Thus the gospel calls us to enter into his journey, united in his death and resurrection, and to grow into his likeness” (103).

12. Ernest Gordon, *Through the Valley of the River Kwai* (New York, NY and London, UK: Harper and Brothers, 1962).
13. (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1973); chapters 7 and 8.
14. Wilson T. Hogue, "Early Ideals of Greenville College," (Unpublished manuscript at Greenville College, June, 1917), 1; cited in W. Richard Stephens, *A River of Streams: Writings of W. Richard Stephens*, ed. Lloyd H. Knox (Greenville, IL: Greenville College, 1991), 46