

Christ the King/Reign of Christ, November 21, 2121

15 minutes from now, we are going to speak these words together:

"He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end."

"He will come again in glory. . ."

For the earliest Christians, the promised return of Christ
utterly changed the way they lived.

They sold everything they had--property and possessions--
and donated the proceeds to the congregation in Jerusalem
which then distributed whatever was needed
to whomever needed it.

And the believers did that because of their conviction
that the Lord was going to return soon. . .in their own lifetimes.

And if it was only going to be a matter of a few years
before it happened, then there wasn't much point
trying to accumulate lots of possessions or open or cash in RRSPs.

In other words, the promise of Christ's return set them free
from their attachment and slavery to this world. . .
and to the things of this world.

Now, the fact that Christ's return didn't take place
in the way and at the time they thought it would
didn't prevent later generations of believers
from thinking and behaving much the same way.

Throughout the last two millenia, there have been countless stories
of charismatic preachers and high-powered evangelists
who predicted Jesus's return on a certain date
and who encouraged, even demanded, that their followers
give away or sell everything they owned. . .
and then dress up in white robes and gather on hilltops
to pray and sing while waiting for Christ to come
and take them all to heaven.

Now, while it is true that such people are generally thought of
 as religious fanatics or even wingnuts,
 we must have admit that they at least take seriously
 one of the major teachings of the New Testament--
 namely, the belief that Jesus will come back to this earth
 as Judge and Lord, as Ruler and Sovereign of all.

As a matter of fact, even we who are Lutherans--
 solid, predictable, unshakeable, unemotional,
 even, dare I say, on occasion, dull and boring--
 even we believe and teach that Jesus will come again.
 And we confess it, not only in the Creeds,
 but also in the Prayer of Thanksgiving
 over the gifts of bread and wine when we say together:
 "Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again."

But what do we mean when we proclaim that Christ will come again?

Well, there are those who contend that
 what the doctrine of the Second Coming means
 is that there will be some cataclysmic event in the future
 in which this present world--the heavens and the earth
 and all that exists, will be consumed and destroyed
 in a spectacular and catastrophic fashion.

And for the believers, that day will be a great and glorious one
 because they will be judged as righteous and faithful
 and welcomed into eternal glory.
 For the unbelievers, on the other hand, not such a good day.
 For them, the last day be a day of dread and foreboding
 because they will be judged and found wanting. . .
 and will inherit, not eternal glory with God,
 but eternal separation from God.

Now, I have to admit here, that for me,
 there are several troubling and distressing implications
 of this concept of the Second Coming of Christ—
 not least of which is that God becomes some sort of ogre
 or monster who demands that people love and worship God
 or be punished forever and ever.

I mean, who could love a God like that?

Fear? Yes, but love? No!

Indeed, if a parent were to say to a child,
 “If you don’t love me and do what I want,
 I will punish you forever”—
 we would turn such a person into the authorities
 and would be perfectly within our rights to do so.

The other disturbing implication of this notion of the Second Coming
 is that those who subscribe to this apocalyptic event
 so often endorse it with such unbridled enthusiasm and glee—
 particularly in regard to the hellfire and brimstone
 that will be visited upon those whom these good Christians
 are convinced will deserve every damn bit of the damnation they get.

I’m never quite sure why the notion of eternal joy for us
 has to involve and be made even more pleasurable
 by knowing that others are suffering eternal punishment,
 especially those we consider our “enemies” or God’s enemies.

I mean, did not Jesus say and pray on the cross,
 “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”?
 And if he is willing to forgive what he suffered unjustly
 at the hands of his enemies. . .and to plead for their forgiveness,
 can we not long for and pray God
 that the same unbounded and undeserved mercy
 shown to us may be shown to others as well?

And that brings us to another way to view the Second Coming
 that allows us to see it, not merely as some sort of relic
 or outdated a museum piece reflecting the philosophical thinking
 of an ancient culture. . .but rather as a contemporary
 and meaningful metaphor—that is, as a way of illustrating
 or looking at life and the world and at Christ’s presence in them **now**.

And this alternative concept or viewpoint involves
 seeing the promised return of Christ, not as a single, apocalyptic event
 happening sometime in the future, but as an event or occurrence
 that happens again and again, in the here and now. . .

whenever and wherever Christ's presence is made real
and Christ's reign is made known.

Look at it this way: If we think of heaven as the realm where God dwells
and where God's power is made visible and experienced
and where God's rule knows no bounds, then "heaven"
is not entirely or necessarily or only "out there" somewhere--
whether "above us" in space or "ahead of us" in time.

Instead, because we believe, teach and confess
that God already lives and acts and reign in this world,
then, in a very real way, heaven is already here around us,
already able to be glimpsed and recognized among us. . .
even while its full glory and grandeur are still to be revealed.
As one of the medieval mystics put it:
"It is heaven all the way to heaven."

Now, for those who subscribe to such an idea or vision,
it is not that, like Elvis, Jesus has "left the building"—
that he has gone away from the earth. . .from our world. . .
and will, one day, sometime in the future, come back again
and kick the door down unexpectedly and dramatically.

It is rather than Jesus is always present among us,
even though he may be hidden or disguised,
unseen and unknown by us and by others. . .
as he was to Pilate who could not reasonably conclude
that this one standing before him with split lip and a cauliflower ear
was. . .and is. . .indeed, a king.

And so his promise to return is that he promises
to "show up" in surprising ways
and in unexpected places and faces and times.

For instance, whenever forgiveness is declared
and the power of sin is broken; when the hungry are fed,
the naked clothed and the strangers welcomed;
wherever peace and reconciliation come about
and mending and restoration and reunion take place
among those who are separated or at odds;

whenever truth is spoken and wherever love is practiced;
 when the bread and wine of Christ's mysterious meal
 are broken and poured, tasted and shared
 and we are made one body in Christ. . .
 and, indeed, become the Body of Christ in this world.

It is in such commonplace and yet extraordinary ways
 that Christ returns to this world. . .that Christ comes again. . .and again.

However, whether we think of the Second Coming
 as something that will happen somewhere off in the future--
 when time and space end and the scroll of human history
 is rolled up and everything that ever was and is and will be
 is concluded and completed and made new again;

or whether we think of Christ's coming again
 in each and every moment we experience grace in our living
 and, most assuredly, when grace surprises us
 with its coming in the moment of our dying—
 no matter how we envision Christ's return,
 what matters most of all about it is this:

That this Jesus whom the Scriptures describe
 as the image of the invisible God, as the One by whom
 all authorities and powers were created
 and in whom and through whom and for whom all things exist;

that this Jesus before whom every knee will bow
 and every tongue confess him as Lord to the glory of God—
 that his promise to return again transforms all of us
 and all of life. . .now.

Or, to put it another way: If what the Scriptures and the church
 and the liturgy and the creeds proclaim as true is true--
 that the crucified, risen and ascended Christ
 will surely come again--
 then everything about life and death. . .
 and everything that happens to us in this world,
 as difficult to understand and accept as it may be—

that everything is different. . .everything is changed. . .
 everything can be endured, even embraced and celebrated.

After all, if we know ahead of time how the story will end,
 then there is nothing to fear before the end comes. . .
 because the One who will end it is the very same one
 who was there at the beginning—
 at our beginnings. . .and who died and rose for us
 out of love for us and in order to share his life with us—
 his rich, full, abundant and eternal life—

a life that we live now in gratitude and gladness
 in this age and this world. . .and live,
 in eager anticipation and hope of life anew
 in the age and the world to come.

So, whether it is considered by some, or even by many,
 as an antiquated and irrelevant teaching and belief,
 one very important reason for the keeping of this Feast
 sometimes called "The Reign or the Rule of Christ"
 is to comfort us with the assurance that since Christ is the King,
 then all the other rulers of this world. . .whether queens or kings,
 emperors or dictators, presidents or prime ministers,
 stockbrockers or currency traders, captains of industry
 or military powers. . .or even the Father of Lies himself—

that all of them are mere pretenders to the throne,
 second-rate petty tyrants who have been vanquished
 by the true Sovereign and Lord of all—
 by the one who is and forever will be "Christ the King".

And so today we proclaim that this One
 who is the beginning and the end, the firstborn of the dead. . .
 that this Christ will come again.
 And that is why, in confident faith,
 we can and will join our voices with those of the saints on earth
 and the hosts of heaven to sing the words of comfort, confidence and praise
 found in Hymn 760: "O Christ the Same"

Amen. SDG