

The Glory of Christ

I. Today we come to the Last Sunday after Pentecost, the end of the Christian Year, to what is named in the liturgy, “The Reign of Christ.”

[Rather than dwell specifically on the biblical texts assigned today my intent will be to help us appreciate what we mean by *‘The Christ.’*]

A. We use many and various calendars today that help us organize time.

1. We experience the passage of time with our senses in the annual cycle of seasons of planet Earth, circling our home star, the Sun.

a. We also have an inner experience of time in our own birth, growth, decline and our finally in our death.

2. In a liturgical church such as ours, we highlight the flow of Earth’s natural seasons with a progression of liturgical seasons:

a. *Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter and Pentecost.*

b. Through our worship, these seasons tell the story of the life of Jesus and in that, Christians say we are introduced to the *Incarnate Christ, the Word made flesh.*

c. Every Sunday reflects a different facet of an infinite and inexhaustible glory that we name as “*The Christ.*”

B. We hear from Colossians today what biblical scholars say is one of the early Christian hymns (1:11-20).

1. The hymn celebrates the culmination of this story we have been following all year of the revelation of Christ.

a. This hymn and others like it portray with extravagant language, a cosmic reality that speaks on this last Sunday of the year of *the Reign of Christ.*

b. The hymn praises Christ as the “*image of the invisible God, (1. “the firstborn of all creation ... in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,\ things visible and invisible, ... thrones, dominions, rulers, powers – all things have been created through him and for him... He is before all things,\ and in him all things hold together.*”

2. Such a high view of Christ places all time and all creation in the full splendor and blazing light of Christ, - *Alpha & Omega,*

- (the beginning and the end).
- a. Christ is the one in whom “*all things hold together.*”
- b. Christ belongs not to a particular people - but to all peoples.
- c. Christ is worshiped by all creation.
- 3. The Colossian hymn sets the organization of time on this grand scale.
 - a. We might call today the Church’s New Year’s Eve.
 - b. The point of the liturgy today is to help us
 - (1. reflect on the meanings of the past,
 - (2. secure ourselves by faith in the present,
 - (3. and look ahead with hope to the future.

II. Cultural Narcissism vs. Plan A

- A. In the news recently we’ve been hearing about a personal characteristic called, “*narcissism.*”
 - 1. Counselors and therapists have long known about this personality trait.
 - a. But until you’ve truly encountered a *narcissist* yourself, you may not grasp the implications of such a personality on the people and world about them.
 - (1. Their world revolves about themselves as the center.
 - (2. It is what you expect for an infant but is obviously arrested development in an adult.
 - b. *Narcissism* is a good analogy of difficulties we have as Christians and the Church itself in coming to terms with the reality of “*the Christ.*”
 - 2. It has to do with a theological history of being focused on the historical life of Jesus,\ but failing to encounter “*the Christ*” in the universal life of God from all eternity,\ so described in the Colossian hymn.
 - a. A short clue to that is how we use the term Christ as a sort of ‘*last name*’ for Jesus.
 - (1. It is not a name but a title that means, “*Anointed One.*”
 - b. We collapse the name and title together, Jesus, and Christ, rather than discern the universal dimension of *the Christ* in and through the person of Jesus.
 - c. And that misses exactly what Christians have named in Jesus as ‘*Incarnation,*’ the eternal Word revealed in human flesh,\ the universal in the particular.

- d. The Church early on developed the doctrine of the Trinity as a way to envision “*the Christ*” in the life of God,\ the eternal manifestation of God in the material creation,\ spirit revealed in matter.
 - e. But in effect what we’ve done is to take Jesus out of the Trinity.
 - (1. Instead of discerning *Christ* as “*the first born of all creation*,”
 - (2. we reduce Jesus, the *Christ* to the one who came to take away our sins.
 - f. Of course we hold redemption important but it actually comes in a bigger context, that of creation and Incarnation.
3. Here is where we get into our problem with cultural narcissism on a big scale.
- a. We are pre-occupied with our own existence as the center,\ our sin,\ life after death for ourselves,\ our crass materialism and consumption,\ our privatized and exclusive religion,\ our human isolation from the natural world,\ and our cosmic loneliness as the only ones.
 - b. The word for it here is, “*anthropocentrism*,” assuming the human world as the center of all creation and purposes of God.
 - c. Christian faith is reduced to a competitive religion for a faithful few who believe the right things.
 - (1. We project all the purposes of God onto the life and work of the human Jesus with little or no demand upon ourselves.
 - (2. At the ascension of Jesus we are questioned by the angels, “*Why do you stand gazing up into heaven?*”
 - (3. “Where has he gone?” we ask, not knowing that the *risen Christ* is all encompassing and everywhere.
- B. Another way to help us make a jump in paradigms is to look at the cosmic scale of deep time.
- 1. We live in a time when science is gifting humanity with a break- through in our understandings of the universe.
 - 2. If you scale chronological history down to the span of one year, with the Big Bang on Jan. 1, then our species, *Homo sapiens*, doesn’t appear until 11:59 pm on Dec. 31.
 - a. That means that our written Bible and the church appeared in the last nanosecond of Dec. 31.
 - b. Can we believe that God had nothing to say until the last nanosecond?
 - c. Rather, as both Paul and the much of Christian theology from earliest times has been saying,

- (1. God has been revealing God's love, goodness, and beauty since the very beginning through the natural world of creation. (Aquinas)
- (2. God looked at everything God had made, and found it very good" (Gen. 1:31).
- 3. The 13th C. Franciscan theologian John Duns Scotus takes the statements such as the Colossian hymn and others that we find at the outset of Ephesians, Hebrews and the Gospel of John and says that the Incarnation is the whole purpose of creation.
 - a. *Christ* is the masterpiece of love in the midst of a creation made for love,\ not a divine plumber come to fix the mess of original sin.
 - b. But we have settled for *Plan B*, or Jesus as a mere problem solver after we messed up.
 - c. The Good News is that *the Christ* is rather, *Plan A*, from the very beginning,\ and Jesus came along much later to make it all visible and loveable and attractive.
 - (1. Jesus is the personal face for us of the universal or Cosmic Christ.
 - d. Salvation is a historical, social and universal notion, which is made very clear already by the Jewish prophets.
 - (1. But we made Jesus very small and then the good news of salvation became very small too.

III. The Cosmic Christ

- A. The prologue of the Gospel of John speaks of Christ, the Word, at the very beginning, through whom all things were made.
 - 1. "*He was in the world that had its very being through him. But the world did not know him.*"
 - a. In the same way, for the last 2,000 years, we have not understood the *Cosmic Christ*.
 - (1. We fell in love with the symbol instead of what Jesus fully represented.
 - b. To love "*Jesus, the Christ*" is to love both the symbol and everything that he stands for – which is precisely everything.
 - c. This lays a wonderful foundation for both a new consciousness and a new cosmology – and a very new notion of religion itself.
 - 2. Richard Rohr writes that this is a new way of thinking for most of us but it is also a very strong, though neglected piece of our Christian tradition.
 - a. He notes how the three Synoptic Gospels are largely talking about Jesus,\ the historical figure who healed and taught and lived in

human history.

- b. The Gospel of John presents the *trans-historical* “*Christ*,”
 - (1. which is why so very few stories in John coincide with Matthew, Mark and Luke)
 - (2. This Christ is frequently making universal “**I AM**” statements and claims. (see John 6:35, 48; 8:12, 24, 58; 10:9, 11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1).
 - (3. These mirror the unspeakable name of the Holy One in Exodus 3:14.
 - (4. It’s very different than the Jesus of Matthew, Mark and Luke so that among the four gospels we have both *Jesus* and the *Christ*.
- c. Only slowly does the truth become believable.
 - (1. Finally the *Body of Christ* is not out there or over there;
 - (2. it’s in you—it’s here and now and everywhere.
- d. The goal is then to move beyond yourself and recognize that what’s true in you is true in all others too.

B. One of the great Christian mystics of our modern era who grasped the new visions of science with Christian faith was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

- 1. He envisioned the cosmos as fundamentally and primarily living.
 - a. Christ, through his Incarnation, is interior to the world, rooted in the world even in the very heart of the tiniest atom.
 - b. “*Nothing seems to me more vital*,” he said, “*from the point of view of human energy, than the appearance and, eventually, the systematic cultivation of such a cosmic sense.*”
[Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Human Energy*, tr. J. M. Cohen (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), 23.]
- 2. As Paul saw *Christ* as a single “New Man” (see Ephesians 2:15), \ as Duns Scotus saw *Christ* as the Alpha point of history,\ so Teilhard saw the same Divine Icon as the Omega point of cosmic history.
 - a. He was both the archetypal starting point and the alluring final goal.
 - b. The end was therefore already contained in the beginning.
 - c. History is both emanating from and also seduced by the same force: Divine Love.
- 3. But, says Rohr, do not confuse this with any sentimental notion of love.
 - a. Teilhard uses the word “love” to describe the cosmic allurements of everything toward everything,\ a structural,\ metaphysical shape to the universe,\ most visible in the basic laws of gravity,\

electro-magnetic fields,\ and sexual reproduction.

[Quotations from Richard Rohr are taken from his two weeks of daily meditations on the Cosmic Christ, www.cac.org 10-23 to 11-4, 2016, which excerpt his various writings.]

- C. Matthew Fox writes that an interest in the *Cosmic Christ* can assist us with a deeper appreciation of the entire cosmos. [Stations of the Cosmic Christ, with Bp. Marc Andrus, 2016]
- a. The cosmos becomes itself a kind of sacrament.
 - (1. It is the manger into which the Incarnate *Christ* was born and it is the manger where you and I also were born.
 - b. A *Cosmic Christ* consciousness can bring us back to a sense of reverence for ourselves, all Earth creatures and beyond and for existence itself.
 - c. The *Cosmic Christ* speaks of the universe as a whole as sacred, sacramental and singular, the “*mystical body of Christ*,” the pattern that connects all things on the large scale, in the words from Colossians.
 - c. In this way the *Cosmic Christ* has the potential to usher in a new reverence and respect for the world and it’s creatures.
- D. Acknowledging the intrinsic value and beauty of creation, elements, plants, and animals is a major paradigm shift for most Western and cultural Christians.
1. We have often mistakenly dismissed this as animism or paganism.
 2. But a new appreciation for *the Cosmic Christ* will give us a vision of God’s love and salvation not only for our own human species, with enough love to go around for all of humanity,
 - a. but also a renewed sense of sharing, community, reverence and respect for all creation, and a shift away from our cultural narcissism.
 - b. In Christ we are participants in an alive universe, an alive Earth begging for us, “*groaning as with the pains of childbirth*,” as St. Paul writes, to wake up.
 3. So, today we celebrate the Reign of that Christ, Alpha and Omega, beginning and end.