

ALPHA AND OMEGA

JOHN 18:33-37; REVELATION 1:4B-8

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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NOVEMBER 22, 2015/26TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

We've arrived at the last Sunday of the Christian year.

Many Christians around the world have historically designated this as "Christ the King Sunday" which is followed Sunday by the beginning of Advent.

Our church also has a tradition of taking some time on this this last Sunday of the year to remember, to honour, and to light a candle for those that we have loved and lost, whether in this past year or beyond that.

Our two texts this morning speak to us about endings and beginnings, about kings and kingdoms.

And they offer us a reminder both of the kind of king we serve and the kind of kingdom we anticipate—for those we have loved and lost, for ourselves, for the whole world.

We begin in the gospel of John, and with Jesus' last day on earth.

We find ourselves in a conversation between Jesus and the Roman governor Pilate.

The Jewish leaders are desperate to have Jesus executed, but their own law does not permit this. So they resort to hauling Jesus before the representative of the hated Roman occupiers.

Pilate initially wants nothing to do with Jesus, but the Jewish leaders refuse to relent, insisting that Pilate deal with him.

So, Pilate summons Jesus , and asks him a question: “Are you the king of the Jews?”

What an interesting question. *Are you a king?*

Jesus certainly doesn’t look much like a king.

He doesn’t seem to have much power, given the fact that he has been dragged before the authorities. He doesn’t seem to have much influence with his own people, themselves a tiny insignificant minority in the vast Roman Empire. He doesn’t seem to have much wealth.

And while he has enjoyed a bit of popularity with the masses, he seems to have done little but arouse the contempt of the authorities of his own people.

Are you a king?

I can imagine Pilate barely suppressing a chuckle as he asks the question.

The obvious answer to anyone who knows anything about kings and kingdoms is, *Of course he’s not! Just look at him!*

And then we hear Jesus’ famous response:

My kingdom does not come from this world...

What on earth does Jesus mean by this? Does it mean that Jesus is a king in the fantasyland of his own mind? Is he one more deluded prophet?

Is this statement code for, I’m a king *up there* in heaven but not *down here* on earth?

Many have thought this is what Jesus was saying, but I don’t think this is what Jesus was saying. N.T. Wright helps us here:

Please note, [Jesus] doesn’t say, as some translations have put it, “my kingdom is not *of* this world”; that would imply that his ‘kingdom’ was altogether other-

worldly, a spiritual or heavenly reality that had nothing to do with the present world at all. That is not the point. Jesus, after all, taught his disciples to pray that God's kingdom would come on "earth as in heaven."

No: the point is that Jesus kingdom does not come *from* "this world." Of course it doesn't... Jesus is denying that his kingdom has a this-worldly *origin* or *quality*. He is not denying that it has a this-worldly *destination*. That's why he has come into the world himself (vs. 37), and why he has sent, and will send, his followers into the world. His kingdom doesn't come *from* this world, but it is *for* the world. That is the crucial distinction.¹

Ok, so Jesus' kingdom is *for* the world but not *from* the world. What does that mean?

I think we can start by asking ourselves the question: With what kind of kingdom is Jesus contrasting his?

The kingdoms that *are* from this world are pretty familiar to us, aren't they? They would have been equally familiar to Pilate.

Pilate knew how kingdoms worked. They worked by the exercise of brutal power and militaristic violence. This is how Rome was built. This is how every Empire that dominated the ancient world was built.

This is how virtually every kingdom has been built and maintained ever since.

We need only have a passing glance at the news of the day to see this.

This is the story of our world, isn't it? This is how kingdoms that come from this world have always operated.

What does Jesus say? *If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting...*

Whatever else Jesus is saying about the kind of king he is and the kind of kingdom he is bringing, we see that *this* kingdom operates by a different kind of logic.

¹ N.T. Wright, *John for Everyone, Part Two* (London: SPCK, 2002), 114-15.

Jesus' kingdom is not a one of brute power or force. It is not a kingdom that operates by dominating its subjects and compelling obedience.

And Jesus is not a king who operates like other kings. Other kings send their subjects off to fight their wars, to protect their borders, to impose their laws.

This king fights by loving, by serving, and ultimately, by laying down his own life.

This king and this kingdom "testify to the truth," Jesus says" (18:37).

Pilate asks, "What is truth?"

Well, *Jesus* is the truth. And the way and the life, as he says earlier in John's gospel (14:6).

Or, as Jesus would reveal to John decades later when he was a prisoner on the Island of Patmos, he is the One...

who is and who was and who is to come... the Alpha and the Omega

"The truth" is not what many have thought it was, what many *continue* to think it is.

Again, I borrow the words of N.T. Wright:

Truth isn't something that you get out of a test tube, or a mathematical formula. We don't have truth in our pockets. Philosophers and judges don't own it. It is a gift, a strange quality that, like Jesus' kingdom, come from elsewhere but is meant to take up residence in this world. Jesus has come to give evidence about this truth. He is himself the truth.²

The truth is, that even though Jesus doesn't look or sound or act like the kings we know, even though his kingdom does not come like the kingdoms of this world come, that *this* king and *this* kingdom are the truth.

About God.

² Wright, 115.

About the world—where it has come from and where it is going.

And about us.

We need this king and this kingdom.

We need this One who was there at the foundations of the earth, who has been present and active throughout history, and who will be present in the future that we believe awaits.

We need this eternal God and his promise of a peaceable kingdom.

We need to know that everything that has been false and damnable and painful in our world and in our own stories will be judged, healed, redeemed.

We need to know that death is not the last word.

Our time is so short on this earth, and we become well acquainted with goodbyes.

But as followers of *this* king, and as citizens of *this* kingdom, we believe that the truth is not *just* that violence will one day give way to peace, that abuse of power and coercion will one day be defeated by self-sacrificial love—glorious as these truths are.

We are also convinced that the dead will rise. We are convinced that our king did not stop with coming once upon a time to proclaim a different kind of kingdom, but that he will come again, and that

every eye will see him, even those who pierced him... (Rev. 1:7).

And we are convinced that *when* he comes again, he will wipe away every tear, that death will be no more (Rev. 20:4), and that this world with its false kings and fragile kingdoms will be pass away.

I am the Alpha and the Omega, Jesus says.

I was thinking about these two words this week: “Alpha” and “Omega.” The first and

last letters of the Greek alphabet.

I was thinking about this metaphor as a writer. When I sit down to write something—a sermon, an article, a blog post, whatever—everything that I have at my disposal fits between “a” and “z.” There is no idea I can convey, no challenge that I can issue, no story that I can tell, no word of comfort that I can produce, that does not use something between a and z to find expression.

There is nothing that can be said in English that goes outside the boundaries of “a” and “z.” The things that can be said using this alphabet are virtually limitless. But everything fits inside that one alphabet.

(I realize that there is such a thing as nonverbal communication, of course. Human beings have ways beyond words to connect with one another – thank God!)

When we say that Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, we are saying that there is nothing that can be told in this story that God is telling—whether the really big story of cosmos, or the really small stories of our individual lives—that happens apart from God.

Nothing takes place outside of this divine alphabet. Our beginnings and our endings and everything in between can be trusted to this king.

Our joy and our sadness.

Our victories and our defeats.

Our praises and our laments.

Our convictions and our uncertainties.

Our loves and our fears.

Our gains and our losses.

If we belong to Jesus, then we belong to the truth, then there is nothing that we can encounter in this life—even death itself—that will not be gathered up and will find its place in God’s new creation.

Today, we recognize endings. Of another year. Of the lives of friends and family members.

Next week, we begin again. We anticipate the coming of a child, the coming of a king, and the inbreaking of a kingdom.

Today, we will come to the front to light candles in memory, in honour, in hope. We will speak the names of people that we love.

Next week, we will come to the front to take a bit of bread and dip in a bit of juice to remember the cross, where God took an ending and turned it into a beginning, and to proclaim Christ's death until he comes again.

Alpha and Omega. Beginning and End. The one who was, who is, and who is to come. The one who makes all things new.

This is our King and this is his kingdom.

Amen.

