



CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY/ FULFILLMENT SUNDAY

This Sunday is the last Sunday in the ecclesiastical year. It is known as "Fulfillment Sunday" or "Christ the King Sunday." This day is a relatively new addition to the church calendar, so there are not many traditions associated with it. Mainly, it points us to the culmination of God's purposes in history through the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:21-28). It is not about Christ *becoming* king (since that happened at the resurrection/ascension), but about the *fulfillment* of his kingship (Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:20). The kingdom has *already* come, and yet in another sense, it has *not yet* come in all its fulness. Thus, we live in light of both the "now" and "not yet" of Christ's rule.

To spell it all out more fully: Christ was definitively coronated king when he rose from the dead and took his place at the Father's right hand. His kingdom progressively expands in the world as he works through his Spirit and church. Christ is presently reigning even if we do not see all things subdued to him (Heb. 2). His kingdom will become more and more visible in the world as the nations are more and more completely brought under his redemptive lordship. At the last day, Christ will be finally and fully revealed as king to all, as every knee bows before him (Phil. 2). Even death itself will be defeated when he raises his people up in resurrection glory so that they are perfectly conformed to his image.

The story of the cosmos is the story of Christ's kingdom. The kingdom gives history its meaning and direction. The kingdom is not "other worldly." To be sure, it comes from heaven -- but it invades and transfigures *this* world, bringing creation to the goal God had purposed from the beginning. If the church calendar commemorates the highlights of cosmic history, "Christ the King Sunday" points us to the end of the story, so to speak. It is a fitting conclusion to the cycle of the

ecclesiastical year.

If this is the last Sunday in the church year, how do we transition into a new year the following Sunday? The church calendar begins a new year with the first Sunday in Advent. Advent must be distinguished from Christmas season. Traditionally, Advent has done double duty, drawing together both the first and last comings of Christ. But these multiple layers are often hard to hold together during the season -- thematically, theologically, liturgically, and psychologically. By celebrating "Christ the King Sunday" at the end of the church year, we are able to simplify and streamline the meaning of Advent. The final coming is still a thread in the meaning of Advent, but the season as a whole focuses on the church's expectations and longings in a wide variety of ways.

Advent is a time of hoping, expecting, and preparing. It's preparation for a party, not the party itself. We are preparing to meet our God. There is even an element of penitence and repentance, and Advent is often linked to Lent. What should we emphasize during Advent? Just as the old covenant saints looked forward to Christ's first coming, so we look forward to his final coming. But Christ "comes" to us in other ways too. He comes within history every time the Word is preached and the sacraments celebrated. He comes to us to bless, chastise, and curse, as is fitting. He comes in grace and in wrath all throughout history, shaking up the kingdoms of this world in order to usher in his kingdom more fully. He came in 30 AD as the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost (Jn. 14:18). He came in 70 AD to judge apostate Israel and destroy the last vestiges of the old covenant system (e.g., the temple and priesthood; cf. Mt. 24). And he still comes through his Spirit and through historical judgments, to fulfill his purposes. All of these "comings" will culminate with his final bodily coming to wrap up history. Thus, Advent is a reminder of all the ways and times in which Christ comes to his people -- and how important it is for us to live in light of these various "comings." One question to ask yourself throughout Advent is: *Am I ready to meet Christ?*

But more than anything, Advent is a season of hope. This is because the Christian life is a life of hope. We are saved in hope, and we live by hope. Hope reminds us that while God has already blessed us abundantly, there is more still to come -- thus we must wait patiently and obediently. Advent hymns, like "Comfort, Comfort, These My People," "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," and "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus," train us in the virtue of hope. They remind us that God's people have always had to wait patiently for the promises to come to fulfillment. And so it is with us.

Of course, as we have done in the past, as we move into Advent, we will "break the rules" and sing a few Christmas songs before Dec. 25 (on the third and fourth Sundays of Advent). But it's helpful to keep in mind the flow of the seasons. The church calendar tells a story; Advent is something of a prologue (or prelude) to that story. It hints at and foreshadows what is to come -- including the final consummation of the story -- but it also prepares us to celebrate the glories of the opening chapter of that story with the birth of the Savior in the manger. If we move into Christmas without first observing Advent, we are in danger of forgetting that Christ's birth had a context. Christ's entered the world because the Father promised long beforehand to send his Son and had worked through Israel's long and winding history to prepare the way for his entrance into the world.