

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD. The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Luke 23:33-43

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (415)

This is the last Sunday of the church year, the Reign of Christ Sunday, Christ the King Sunday. It's a late-coming feast day. Pope Pius XI instituted it, in 1925, in response to the rise of secularism and secular ultra-nationalism, the Fascists of Italy, the Communists of the new Soviet Union, and eventually Naziism as was hoping to swallow Europe and eventually the whole world.

I imagine we're pretty sure who the bad guys were in this world of a century ago. We might also wonder why secularism in general was included in the Pope's sights. The last one standing of all these trends of the early 20th century, secularism per se never became governmental, which might be why it's the last one standing. It never became so established as made easily toppled. But that's not to say it never came to pervade—and doesn't still pervade.

Secular, the word, is one of those words whose meaning is unclear even though the purpose to which its put is quite often pointed. Not exactly a slur, it is slur-ish. But it does actually *mean* something, helpfully thought to mean three things.

This is Charles Taylor's defining, he of the monumental work *A Secular Age*. In a smaller work, meant to make the monumental approachable, James K.A. Smith sums it up well.

One meaning of secular is anything that deals within the imminent frame, the earthly, that which can be done with no reference to transcendent power or the reality of things beyond the things of this world. A social worker, for example, is a secular profession, as opposed to a pastor which is religious, sectarian, done in reference to something beyond the imminent frame of things.

A second meaning is to name those things that are not religious, like secular schools as opposed to parochial schools, or a secular public square as opposed to a politics gathered under the authority of something (understood as) divine or transcendent. When this secularism becomes the social norm, is indeed the assumed posture of each individual member of society, religious belief and practice now happen as outposts, intentional, a matter of individual will and choosing.

Which makes possible a third meaning of secularism: "A society is secular insofar as religious belief or belief in God is understood as one option among others and thus is contestable (and contested)." In a secular society, it's one option to hold religious views, and it's not necessarily the easiest one. The intention and attempt to maintain religious faith become increasingly taxing. Faith in a transcendent God becomes less something that catches you up and more something you need to hold on to with though slipping grip.

It's this that Pope Pius XI might well have worried about, because, you know, he was a company man. And so it might seem a little patronizing, this literally pompous person taking issue with our way of life. It might seem a little silly, like when your parents worried about that rock-n-roll music or that school dance where boys and girls were swaying, coupled, too close together. "We're fine, Pope Pius XI. You can relax."

But I wonder.

This last Sunday of the church year comes, of course, every year, but in each of the three liturgical years set out for us it comes to us a little different, depending on which of the three gospels we're referring to. This, Year C, has had us following Luke's version of Jesus' life and ministry, death and resurrection—and Luke's vision of Jesus' kingship has us situated in a strange place. Though the kingship of Christ can only well be understood as a transcendent reality, as something that comes to its fullest meaning well beyond the imminent frame, the narrative moment of Jesus' kingship has us very much in the world.

Stranger still, it has us as he hangs from the cross, dies on the cross. According to Luke, the inaugural throne of Christ is the cross.

This is the place where Jesus confronts the world and its exercising of power, where he receives its worst without participating in it, and where he rises above it, which in effect de-thrones it and reveals him as sitting on still higher a throne.

He could have done otherwise, it's always worth considering. He could have fought back, with a sword or at least fist—which would had to have come with some divine power, right? He could have fought back with this rag-tag gathering he'd managed to call forth. Of course, they wouldn't have gotten far against the imperial might of Rome and its collusion with the religious powers of the priesthood. But it might at least have had them all less like a bunch sheep whose shepherd was being led silently, and maybe even willingly, to slaughter.

It would also have had them join in, submit to the powers at play in the world, submit by joining in with these violent means and put to that violent purpose: survival of the self, victory over and humiliation of the enemy.

No, the cross is the place where Jesus confronts the essential violence at the running of the world, where indeed he accepts it and takes it in, transcends it and then offers it back as peace, as compassion: "They know not what they do." *We* know not what we do.

It's not always an easy concept to preach, the kingship of Christ, at least not in the United States. After all, we don't have a king, we don't want a king, and until recently we haven't quite been able to imagine what an earthly king ruling over us might feel like, might be. Indeed, in this secular age in which we live, in this secular society that sets the course for the rest of the Western world, whatever kings there are still reigning on earth have been sort of comical, or at least inconsequential, a person more likely to be covered in *People Magazine* than *The Wall Street Journal*. Like, the king and queen of Norway make near annual visits to St. Olaf College, where my sons are in school, and the boys send pictures of the royal couple's tour of the school, a fine-looking couple in fine-looking wool dress. Not much to see here. I mean, really.

But this year has us more in mind of a king, I'd imagine, and with a new view of what kingship might look like, might aggress to look like. Someone who operates without question as deserving of the world's treasures. Someone who operates without question as the only one in the power structure whose feelings matter. A king is more typically the *last* one to be hurt when the going gets rough, the *last* one to suffer when the nations rage and the kingdoms totter. "Long live the king!" soldiers will die in battle yelling. But why him, why them: the king and his courtiers apparently truly believing no one besides them has a right to their own subjectivity, might actually feel pain and might actually be endowed with rights not to be exploited, not to be made

amusement, not to put to purposes for the king's pleasure or his courtiers' pleasure with no regard for their own freedom and pursuit of their own happiness.

Turns out about this secular age: it could well be understood as fruit of a post-monarchical world. Our leaders don't have divine right but rise to leadership because of rational means (elections) and are put to reasonable purpose (civil governance). And yet this age has produced kings just as monstrous as those of old.

At least the kings of the premodern age accepted as a matter of unquestioned, indeed assumed, cosmology, that there was a power higher even than theirs and they would ultimately answer to it. After all their "divine right" came from *someone*, and they would answer to that someone *someday*.

The kings these days, and their monstrous courtiers, seem to think they'll never answer to anyone. They can cut USAID with no prick on their conscience. They can flip the switch on and off of SNAP benefits with no thought, to say nothing of fear, of some future judgement day, watch the nationwide scurrying to church basements everywhere where there might at least be on offer some cans of tuna and jars of apple sauce. They do this, it seems, with no worry at all that they might one day encounter someone with power to overcome theirs. They can round up girls in South Florida for their pleasure, fly them off to parts unknown, and use them as they like or at least associate with those who do, amused that such girls are so plentiful and so unimportant past their most nubile days.

I hate such amusement. I have hated such amusement, the smirking of cowards on sidelines, hated it as much as I have those in the arena, at the very center, of cruelty boldly pursued. I have even *seen* them smirking while cruelty's coming at me.

Christ the king would rule from the place of solidarity with those girls. *Christ* the king would rule from those church basements, the one handing out food, the one receiving food, and indeed the food itself, devoured that we might live. *Christ* the king would wield the power to overmatch the cruel power of earthly kings, yet it's the power of love, the power of wisdom, a true seeing of what's going on and why. It's the power to grace with freedom those caught in the arena, a power to make rise all who are caught in this world: "Today you will be with me in paradise."

Which names one quality that comes with this feast day, returns to the imagining something that secularism would have us forget or forego or dismiss as a fantasy: the end. God's glorious and pacifying end. God's original purpose and ultimate vision for what the creation shall

be. When all is said and done. When all the original word has spoken and has sent forth and has returned having accomplished is complete, made perfect in its entirety.

The end, the why of it all, the reason for all the effort at life. Its struggles, heartbreaks and victories; its humiliations, gentle joys and commonplace comforts: why?

This sense of an ending reveals a thing's ultimate shape which lends an intelligibility that is otherwise lost. The ending of a thing, whether a book or a piece of music or a project or a life, gives sense as to the why of it, its ultimate purpose, the thing it ultimately does or serves. This is what's helpful about Aristotle's four causes, which are the formal, the efficient, the material, and the final.

The formal cause is the form that gives rise to the particular. That there is a form called "pulpit" gives cause to this particular pulpit, though different from other pulpits still yet conforming to the pulpit form.

The efficient cause for a thing is the means by which it came to be, that this pulpit came to be because of the work of a craftsman.

There is the material cause of it, the materials that make up the thing, the carved oak that could be thought this pulpit's "because."

Then there is the final cause, the purpose to which a thing is put, this pulpit being the place for the preached word. The thing is, the purpose of a thing isn't always known at its outset, or purpose can be made more complex by the happenings of history and the doings of people who (let's be honest) so often don't know what we're doing, not truly, not ultimately.

We have a book at home that's the perfect width for propping open a door we often want propped open. The writer of the book, the paper that makes it up, none of these were purposeful as a doorstop. Yet the happenings of history and the doings of the Goodmans have made this book a doorstop. See, once something is finished, you can see more fully what it was all about, what history and happenstance, chance and grace, have made it to be all about, what indeed was its final cause.

So, that we *have* a final cause (if yet still a mystery), each of us and all of us together; that we *have* a perfect purpose to which we are put though we know not what we do: this is a profession of faith, which also though stands to reason.

And what that final cause is, love and glory, thanksgiving and peace, however such eternally reigning things might be accomplished: this is also a profession of faith.

Any more knowledge of that is beyond us to know. What each and all our of our ultimate purposes are, and purpose is, can only be said in the most universal, even ephemeral terms (glory, peace, beauty, light) lacking so much particularity that we might otherwise really, really want. Yet, that there is such a thing as we want, even if it can't be ours absolutely and fully to have and to know as of now: this feels essential. For the living of our days, for the ordering of our priorities, for the persevering through struggle and the withstanding amidst suffering and the insistence upon justice: the sense an ending brings feels essential.

Interesting that the modern age has explicitly denied such purposefulness, such teleology proscribed in much of modern philosophy and thought, such teleology, that is talk of the aim of a thing or its end, is critiqued as absurd—because it ascribes purpose to things professed as mere accident.

Interesting that secularism if more tacitly cuts off this line of thinking—for to imagine a final end, whose purpose was there from the start, is to refer to a reality beyond the imminent frame, to refer to something transcendent and even personal, something of intelligence that would have intention and creative will. Truly, to imagine a final end, a good purpose to which this whole thing is put and to which each of us can meaningfully take part even in the here-and-now, is to imagine God, which is the thing, and perhaps the only thing, this modern age would disallow, this secular age would actively prohibit. “You can imagine this far, and no farther,” the voice of modernity would insist. “You can imagine to this horizon of the provable and therefore predictable, but you cannot imagine beyond it, for to do so is to be unserious, fantastical. It is to break the frame of the social imaginary we’ve all agreed, if tacitly, to dwell within.

It always puts me in mind of a sign in a parking lot in Lenox Dale. Outside a small office building, one spot is marked with a sign that reads, “Don’t even think of parking here,” which, brat that I am, always has me pause beside it and think about it. I even think, “I’m thinking about it.” Because otherwise I am not free. If even my imagining has been proscribed, if *especially* my imagining has been proscribed, then I am not free.

Ironically, tragically, the secular age purports itself to be freeing. That we no longer must imagine ourselves as fruits of some ultimately authoritative creative will that is other and indeed greater than our own, that we no longer might even understand ourselves as belonging to anyone but ourselves, our *being* the fruit of another’s *longing*, we are now free to do as we like. But that freedom is bound by such imminence that it’s more truly mere reaction to limitation, like sound bouncing noisily around in a room too small and too hard for what music might otherwise be

made. That purported freedom is more bound than the freedom found in be-longing into transcendence, that realm beyond limitation, that realm of eternal light and love, eternal word and music and fulfilled silence.

This is the last Sunday of the church year. With it we might imagine ourselves launched from time into eternity, set loose from the cross that nails us down into a paradise whose promise might arrive in some fullness even today. We know not what we do, we rely on shepherds that may or may not be good, we follow in ways that might be true and might be deceiving. God's grace perseveres in our regard. The ocean of our experience fits in and gets form from God's almighty embrace. The world says, "Don't even think about it." But we aren't so easily bound.

Thanks be to God.