

ORDINARY TIME

Ordinary Time is the season for the last half of the Christian Year. It runs from Trinity Sunday (the Sunday after Pentecost) through Christ the King Sunday (the Sunday before the First Sunday in Advent), and is the longest of all the seasons of the Christian Year. Its liturgical color is green, except for Trinity Sunday, All Saints' Day (or the first Sunday in November) and Christ the King Sunday, when the color is white. It has also been called Trinity Season or Kingdomtide.

Why is this season called “ordinary”? This longest season in the Christian Year is centered on a change in direction from the focus of the first part of that year. Beginning with the first Sunday in Advent, the first half of the Christian Year is focused upon Jesus – upon an Old Testament looking forward to him, to his anticipated advent in a politically-dominated Israel, to his birth, his life, his ministry, his teachings, his miracles, his triumphal procession into Jerusalem as the announced “king of the Jews”, his last week with his disciples, his betrayal, trial, scourging and crucifixion, and then his glorious resurrection that brings new purpose, hope and direction to his followers – the earliest Church. The “Jesus” half of the Christian Year then ends with Pentecost, as the Holy Spirit descends upon and fills the church as they seek to be Christ’s disciples to the world. That six months of the Christian Year is a most extraordinary season of celebrating the One who is liberator, redeemer, savior and Lord to the world.

The second season of the year is much more “ordinary” in theme and in nature. It deals with the church “militant” – the church, sent forth by Jesus through these extraordinary events to become Jesus alive today in a very ordinary world. It is about the church getting down to the business to which it has been called by Christ. So, from June through November, God’s people encourage and seek to motivate one another to be deeply engaged in the world as Christ called us to be engaged. That engagement includes bringing good news in our words, in our work for social justice, in our effort to empower people, and in the very quality of our life together. What “ordinary time” is about is our effort to motivate and encourage each other as the church of Christ to work for the transformation of the world into the world as God intended it to be. That is the focus of the season of “Ordinary Time”.

Trinity Sunday (8th Sunday of Ordinary Time)

Genesis 1:1—2:4a; Psalm 8; Matthew 28:16-20; II Corinthians 13:11-14

Trinity Sunday is the first Sunday in Ordinary Time, and is the Sunday following Pentecost. It is possible, when there is an extremely early Easter, for there to be a 9th Sunday in Ordinary Time that is distinct from Trinity Sunday (thus making Trinity Sunday the 8th Sunday in Ordinary Time rather than the 9th). Scripture is assigned for that anomaly in the standard lectionary. However, if one so chooses, one can intermix the scriptures for Trinity Season and the 9th Sunday in Ordinary Time, using any of the scripture – as long as there is an Old Testament lesson, Psalm, Gospel Lesson and Epistle lesson. The lectionary scripture for the 9th Sunday in Ordinary Time appears separately under the 9th Sunday designation rather than in this Trinity Sunday heading.

The observance of Trinity Sunday is of rather late origin. It was established by Pope John XXII in 1334 to mark the transition from the first half of the liturgical year and its commemoration of Christ, to the beginning of the second half of the liturgical year that concentrates upon the church in the world. Trinity Sunday has been particularly important to churches that come out of the English tradition because it was the Sunday on which St. Thomas Becket was consecrated as the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162.

In a most profound way, Becket symbolizes what the season of Ordinary Time is all about, with its primary emphasis on the Church Militant. A chancellor of King Henry II and a layman, Becket was rushed through ordination as a priest in order to be consecrated as Henry's choice for Archbishop of Canterbury and head of the English portion of the Roman Catholic Church. Henry, who was in constant struggle with the papacy over supremacy in England, believed that by putting his "crony" on the archbishop's throne, he would have his way over the papacy. That was not to be the case. Becket took his responsibilities seriously, and called Henry to accountability. When, in 1164, Henry sought to bring the church in England and its priests under his control, Becket opposed him, forcing him by his skillful use of the powers he had as a priest and archbishop to release political power over the church. This caused such a breach between Henry and Becket that it resulted in Becket's assassination at Henry's behest¹ in 1170. But Becket, though dead, won the day because he was canonized as a saint in 1172, Henry was forced to repent and Becket became one of England's most popular saints.

What the struggle between Becket and Henry was all about was whether Christianity was to be under the authority of the political power of the day or whether it was to stand over against that power, calling it to moral and just accountability. With his martyrdom, Becket won the day as the church became free of the constraints of the political order, instead calling it to social responsibility. *That* is what Ordinary Time is all about!

Genesis 1:1—2:4a is the first creation story (the second being Genesis 2:4b-25). The first story centers on the creation of the entire cosmos, but centers upon the earth. The second is far more local in focus, with all of it occurring within the Garden of Eden. The first story begins almost poetically.

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light", and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day" (Gen. 1:1-5).

In the first creation story, God creates the world in six days and rests on the seventh, thereby establishing a day of Sabbath rest and the entire concept of the sabbatical after having brought order out of chaos. The first five verses of Genesis set the pattern for the recital of God's work on each of the six days of creation.

¹ Henry never admitted to arranging the assassination of Becket, but he did eventually publicly repent of it. What happened was that Henry, in a fit of anger at being defied once again by Becket, stormed "Where is there a knight who will rid me of this man?" Several of his knights heard Henry, and obliged him.

When scripture deals with the creative work of God, it stresses that God created the universe *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) (cf. John 1:3; Heb. 11:3; II Peter 3:5). But in the first verses of Genesis 1, the emphasis falls on God's progressive ordering of the world, not out of nothing, but out of formlessness, chaos and emptiness.

The first verse of the Bible can be translated "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (KJV, RSV). But it can also be translated with equal legitimacy, "In the beginning *when* God created the heavens and the earth" (NRSV, NJPS). Whatever way the translator wishes to translate this verse, it is describing creation as a "soup" of chaos and darkness, with no form, purpose or order to it. The six-day work of creation undertaken by God described in Genesis 1, then, is that of God bringing order and restraint out of chaos (Psalm 104:5-9). Creation is thus understood as ordering, as imposing a design on formlessness and chaos.

This scripture then goes on to describe God as hovering or brooding over this chaos. The image is that of an immense eagle covering the chaos with its outstretched wings and, step-by-step, making this chaos into a habitation for human beings. That work of creation occurs in six steps, each step following exactly the same pattern, as follows.

First, that step of creation occurs through the word ("God said"). Second, a command is issued from God ("Let there be . . ."). Third, what was commanded by God then happens ("And it was so"). Fourth, an evaluation then occurs ("It was good"). Finally, a chronology is stated ("The first day").

Genesis 1:1-5 records only the creation that occurs on the first day. But it also sets the pattern for God's remaining works of creation. In this first day of creation, the primordial "soup" of chaos is lightless and landless. It is unordered and unfilled. God thus speaks to it, "Let there be light", light is created and that light separates itself from the brooding darkness. "And God saw that the light was good". "And there was evening and there was morning, the first day".

On the second day of creation (1:6-8), the attention of the writer moves from the cosmos as a whole to one particular portion of the cosmos, that portion upon which salvation history will center – the earth. Thus, the focus of the writer shifts from looking upon the "Big Bang" of a rapidly expanding and coalescing universe (as if the writer were in some way standing off apart from the universe and watching it explode into being) to standing upon one primeval planet within the solar system of one corner of the universe, looking out upon that universe from that planet and watching that planet be molded from chaotic material into an environment that could sustain life and ultimately, humanity. Standing on that planet at its chaotic beginnings, the writer hears God speak the word that "makes a dome and separates the waters that are under the dome from the waters that are above the dome. And it was so" (1:7).

The ancients believed that the chaotic "soup" of creation was water. In order for a world to be created, therefore, that chaotic water had to be separated, so that space could be made for a planet. Therefore, they believed that God created a dome which spread over the world, and much as does a soup bowl when being washed in a larger bowl, separate the waters "above" the bowl from the waters "under" the bowl so that an air pocket is created at the bottom of the bowl,

and thus “dry land appear” (vs. 9). It is that perspective to which the writer of Genesis 1 is referring as he presents the rationale for the creation of dry land out of the “soup” of universal watery chaos. “And there was evening and there was morning, the second day” (vs. 13).

On the third day, continents and islands break out of the chaotic planetary seas that earlier had been separated from the cosmic waters; thus, dry land appears (vss. 9-13). That fecund land springs into life, bearing “plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it” (vs. 11). But there are as yet neither animals nor creatures upon the earth – only plants.

The specific designation of the plants is intriguing, however. There are two kinds “plants yielding seed” and “fruit trees that bear fruit with the seed in it”. Presumably, there were many plants that sprung forth on the third day of creation, but the only ones worthy of note are “plants yielding seed” and “fruit trees” – the backbone of the Israelite economy. The Hebrew word translated “plants yielding seed” (*eseb*) is actually the Hebrew word for “grains” – that is, wheat and barley. “Fruit trees that bear fruit with the seed in it” is a reference to the tree crops which augmented the wheat and barley of the Hebrew economy – olive trees, grapes, pomegranates, dates, etc. Thus, within the creation story itself the very economy of Israel is indicated, but is indicated as a creative act of God and not that of human beings. The very wealth of the land was “the gifts of God for the people of God”. “And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day” (vs. 13).

The fourth day is the creation of light and darkness. God’s command is, “Let there be light in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth” (vss. 14-15). The sense of the passage is not so much that the stars, comets, meteors and planets are being created for the first time as it is that they become visible to the earth. It is as if a hypothetical person, standing upon the primitive earth, sees the clouds that previously covered the sky pull apart so that rather than light being defused, he/she can see that there are particular objects on “the dome of the sky” that bring light to the earth.

What is particularly fascinating about this passage is the care with which it is written. The author states, “God made the two great lights – the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night – and the stars” (vs. 16). A dominant religious theme of the first two millennia before Christ was that of the worship of the Sun and the Moon as gods. In fact, a few hundred years before the writing of this text a pharaoh of Egypt, Akhenaten, had torn Egyptian society apart over his attempt to replace the Egyptian chief deity, Amon-Re, with the Sun God, Aten. But in this passage, the author wants to make two things clear. First, the sun and the moon are not gods but are only objects that have been created by God. In fact, the author is very precise about this, intentionally saying “God made the two great lights” and “God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth”, so that there is no question who is and who is not the Creator. Second, the author does not even bother to name the two objects but only calls them “the greater light” and “the lesser light” – thus making clear that they are of such unimportance that they don’t even deserve to be named (much less worshipped). Thus, through the most precise use of language, the author has demoted the sun and the moon from deity to their proper place of simply being those objects in the universe that provide light to the earth! But though

reduced to their proper place, when recognized for what the sun, moon and stars truly are vis-a-viz the earth, “God saw that it was good”.

The fifth day of creation introduces the first animals (vss. 20-23). These are “swarms of living creatures” that are in the sea (vs. 21) and the birds. But there are not yet any mammals or even land animals. But even if the earth is populated only by sea creatures, birds and amphibians, “God saw that it was good”.

It is only on the sixth day (vss. 24-25) that mammals and land animals are created. They fall into three categories: “cattle”, “creeping things” and “wild animals of the earth of every kind” (vs. 24). “Cattle” doesn’t simply mean “bovines” but any domesticated animal (e.g., Gen. 6:20; Lev. 11:1-8). These are distinguished from “creeping things” (i.e. reptiles, bugs and insects) and “wild animals”, which are the “living things” of the wild, but particularly carnivores. To all of these animals, God gives the capacity and inclination to “be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth” (vs. 22).

But it is also on the sixth day that God completes his highest creation – humanity. “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (vss. 26-27).

Humanity is God’s final and climactic creation. Humans are created by God and intended for two pursuits that no other creation of God is intended. First, we are made in the image of God (vss. 26-27). Second, we are given dominance over other animals and the earth (vs. 26). And that creation, the author declares, “was *very* good”!

First, all humanity is made in the image of God. What is meant by humanity being made in the image of God? In the ancient Near East, the ruling monarch was seen either as that nation’s god in human flesh (“God-in-the-flesh”) or that god’s special and unique representative on earth (“human yet god”) with the mandate from that god to rule in that god’s stead. It was this concept that the author of the first chapter of Genesis both embraces but expands to all human beings. It is not simply that one man or woman is Yahweh’s special representative on earth. Rather, all human beings are “made in the image of God”. All human beings are “royal” representatives of God, and therefore are meant to assume responsibility for the care and wise stewardship of their “corner” of creation. Further, the author is implying the equality of all human beings, for he applies to all people what formerly had been applied only to monarchy. That is, because all human beings are created in the image of God, then all hold innate God-given worth, and therefore deserve to be treated with equal dignity and respect. Thus, with the proclamation of this doctrine, the status of all human beings is leveled so that there is no intrinsic difference between monarch and subject, slave and owner, male and female, “Jew” or “Gentile”. There is no biblical justification for the oppression of any group of people by another group, because all are created in the “image of God”!

Second, all humanity is given dominance over other animals and the earth (1:26, 28). Some perceive “dominion” as meaning unlimited power over and even license to exploit animals and the environment for humanity’s self-interest. However, the word as used in the creation story must be understood within the context of humanity being made in God’s image. If all human beings are “royal” representatives of God in order to assume responsibility for the administration of God’s rule in their “corner” of creation, then “having dominion” must be understood as humans exercising the same kind of rule God would exercise in caring for the world God had created. Obviously, God would not be interested in exploiting and destroying either the environment or the animal or plant life he had created; rather God would be interested in preserving and nurturing it. Therefore, for humans to “have dominion” would not be to rape the earth for human aggrandizement, but instead to nurture and care for it. That this is the perspective out of which the author is writing is realized in Genesis 2:15, when humanity is directly instructed to “till” and “serve” the garden (the literal meaning of the Hebrew word used there).

The first creation story doesn’t end with the sixth day, however. There is still one more day of creation. “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created” (2:1-4a).

Creation doesn’t end with the formation of humanity. It ends with the formation of the Sabbath. After six days of creativity, God rested on the seventh day. And it was the act of resting that completed the work of creation. The author states this quite clearly: “And on the *seventh* day God finished the work that he had done” (2:2a). The highest creation is not humanity, but Sabbath! The Hebrew word for “rested” is “*shabat*” – or “Sabbath” (the Anglicized form of the Hebrew word “Shabat”). Rest, reflection, quiet is an integral part of the creation process; one can’t be truly creative by always being active. True creativity can only occur within the context of reflection.

It is God’s behavior at creation that is the model for the behavior that best suits the image of God – humanity (cf. Exod. 20:8-11). The Hebrew people celebrated this reality in their celebration of Shabat (Sabbath), with one day of the week dedicated to the worship of God, gathering as family, ceasing work and being together in “quietness and confidence” (cf. Isa. 30:15) (the rabbis even suggested that Shabat was the time both for quality time with one’s children and for leisurely and luxurious love-making with your spouse). But the Sabbath became the archetype for much of Israel’s social legislation, as well. Thus, every seventh year was the Sabbatical Year in which the land was to rest (lie fallow), the economy was to rest (all debts forgiven) and social structures were to be relaxed (all slaves set free) (Deut. 15:1-18). Likewise, every seventh Sabbatical year was to be the Jubilee (on the 49th year) in which not only were the regulations of the Sabbatical Year to be obeyed but a fourth stricture was also to be observed – all land was to be returned to its original owners so that Israel could be re-created into the equitable and just entity it had been created by God to be (Lev. 25:8-55).

There are a number of pivotal lessons that can be taken out of the First Creation Story. The first is that of the necessity for Sabbath rest and of centering upon God (as developed in the previous paragraph). A second is the nature of humanity as made in the image of God and therefore co-creators with God in the shaping, maintaining and preserving of the world. A third is that of perceiving the relationship between word and action. The entire creation event is built around refrains of God speaking the next phase of creation into being, then it happening, and then the resulting product could be pronounced good.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”, St. John declares (John 1:1). The Word was God. It is the word of God that speaks the universe, the earth and all its creatures into being. What is presented in the First Creation Story is a recital of the process of creation that bears amazing correlation with the discoveries of science of the order by which the universe, the earth and all that lives upon it were formed. That becomes truly amazing when one realizes that this creation story was written more than 3,000 years ago. But what is unique about the Creation Story is that it concentrates not upon the process but the Actor. God spoke the creative instruction (“Let there be light”, “Let the dry land appear”, “Let the waters bring forth creature”, “Let us make humankind in our own image”, etc.). And then it happened. The text doesn’t tell us how it happened. It simply states that, in each instance, it happened. But it happened upon the word of God! The theories of macro-evolution (evolution beyond species), micro-evolution (evolution within species), intelligent design or creation could all be explanations for what happened. No theory is eliminated by the text; any and all are consistent with it. But the point is that the author of the First Creation Story tells us that God spoke the word – God ordered the creation – and it was so! And because it was so, it was deemed “good”! Creation didn’t occur by happenstance, but by the acted-out Word of God. The universe, the solar system, the earth, all life upon the earth is all God-breathed. “The spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (1:2). “And God saw that it was good!”

Essentially, what the first chapter of Genesis presents to the reader is the reality that the work of God is the work of creating order out of chaos, habitation out of formlessness. God is at work ordering a new world so that all creation will praise Him and will share in the world God created as God intended it to be – humanity living in relationship with God and each other, acting justly in public life and perceiving all wealth as a gift continuously being given by the creative God to guarantee that there are no poor. From its very origins, the biblical message is one of God always at work creating the world and shaping humanity into God’s image. Thus, God is here portrayed in the Old Testament lesson for Trinity Sunday as the progenitor, the “Father” of all of creation.

Today is Trinity Sunday. So it is appropriate to ask what the examination of the First Creation Story has to do with Trinity Sunday. It is an oblique relationship. In the first six days of creation, God speaks the word regarding the next step of creation and it happens. But when the story gets to the creation of humanity, there is an intriguing change in the wording. “Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion” (1:26); then the author names the creatures over which humans will have dominion.

For the first time in the Creation account, God speaks to someone. Up until this point, God had spoken the word to whatever created order there was out there. But when God creates humanity,

He speaks the word to someone. Further, he includes that one to whom he is speaking into the community of those doing the creating – God’s self. He speaks in the plural to someone, who can obviously hear him, and includes that other in the creative act.

Some Christian theologians look at this passage and suggest that this is an indication of the Trinity. Since God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, as a part of orthodox Christian theology, are co-eternal with God the Father, then they suggest it is to these two other persons of the Godhead that God the Father is speaking in this creative act of making humanity.

That is a possible explanation of this otherwise curious passage. And that is the reason that this passage has traditionally been included among the scriptures selected for the Trinity Sunday lectionary. But it must also be pointed out that most biblical scholars disagree with this interpretation of Genesis 1:26.

There are other equally valid explanations for God addressing someone in this great step of creation, and of using the plural in doing so. The first explanation is that this is simply the royal “we” (as in Queen Victoria saying, “We are not amused!”). A second explanation is that God is addressing the human he is creating, for this creature is unlike any of the other creatures that have issued from God’s word, for this human is made in the image and likeness of God. Thus, as one who has not yet fallen into sin, the human is of the same nature as God and God is addressing him for the unique, sentient creature he/she is. A final explanation is that God is addressing the divine council, the gathering of heavenly beings (angels, archangels, seraphim, cherubim) that preceded God’s creation of the world and perhaps even of the universe as this, the most important step in the work of creation, is about to take place (e.g., Gen. 16:7, I Kings 22:19-23; Job 1:6-7; Jer. 23:18, 22). Any of these explanations is of equal validity as is the suggestion that this reference is the first indication in the scriptures of the Trinity.

Psalm 8 is, next to the 23rd Psalm, probably the best known hymn in the Psalter. It begins and ends with the refrain, “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth” (vss. 1a, 9). If there is anything this psalm is about, it is about the sovereignty of God – that all that exists (including humanity) owes its existence to Yahweh who, as the God of creation and sustenance, is sovereign over all the earth. “You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouths of babes and infants, you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger” (1b-2).

The psalm then presents three primary points. First, as Creator, God is responsible for all creation from the cosmos itself to the smallest microbe. “When I look at your heavens; the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them” (vss. 3-4)? The psalmist moves from the greater to the less. He begins with praising God for creating the entire cosmic order, the universe of the stars, the moon and then, presumably, our planet”. All this is “the work of your fingers”, the fingers of a creator molding from clay the universe in which we exist.

Second, the Psalm deals with the exalted place given to humanity by God. If one looks at the vastness and complexity of God’s creation of the entire cosmos, then, in comparison “What are

human beings that you are mindful of them (or) that you care for them?” We seem like the puniest of objects in the universe.

“Yet you have made humans a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor” (vs. 5). We may be small, but we are mighty! The phrase “a little lower than God” can also be equally translated “a little less than the gods”; the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek translates this reference as “the angels”. In other words, what the Psalmist is saying is that humanity doesn’t lie at the apex of creation; we are not the last word in evolution. We are just the most advanced of what has been. There is higher – “angels” or “the gods” or even “God”. But we are only “a little lower”, with amazing God-like capacities within ourselves, capacities we need to respect and hold in awe rather than to exploit.

In a very profound sense, this is an ecological psalm. That becomes clear in its third point. “You have given humanity dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas” (vss. 6-8). The Hebrew word that is used to describe humanity’s capacity must be translated “*dominion*”, not “*domination*”. There is a profound difference between the two.

“Domination” means “supremacy over a person or thing”, a “controlling influence”, “top-down authority”, even the right to exploitation. It is essentially a negative word. “Dominion” in the Old Testament tradition, however, means “rulership over”; that is, humans are to rule over the environment in the way that a king of Israel rules over the nation; it is not about supremacy but about the exercise of responsibility.

How did an Israelite king rule? Deuteronomy gave the clearest instructions on the office of the Israelite king (Deut. 17:14-20). The king was not to be the “regent” of the nation, its supreme monarch. That position was reserved for God, and God alone. Rather, he was to be the “vice-regent”, serving under the authority of God and in a manner consistent with God’s continuing creation and improvement of the world.

Thus, the king as “vice-regent” was to be a commoner, an ordinary person whom God would select to be monarch. His reign was not to be passed on to his heirs (this was one of the unresolved tensions between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah in the south’s commitment to the Davidic dynasty). Rather, each new monarch would be chosen from the people. The reward of the Israelite king for wisely ruling his nation was not in the accumulation of wealth for himself or his family or even his tribe, nor was it to increase his power. He was to live frugally. He was not to have a harem or many wives. He was not to enslave his subjects or sell them into slavery to another king. Finally, he was to keep a copy of the book of the Law before him and have a portion of it read to him each day in order to remind himself of his obligations as a king (not what were his privileges). Kingship, as described in Deuteronomy, was unlike any other monarchy existing anywhere else in the East in the millennium before Jesus’ birth.

Deuteronomy communicated to the nation and those in the political system that the system exists, not to build self-serving power but to dispense justice. Justice is to be the continual and

inevitable outcome of a monarch's reign, the only measurement by which that king's rule is to be evaluated. His rule exists to serve the people, and he is not to perceive the nation as his personal property for him to use to further his own ends or to increase his wealth. A nation and culture built on relationship with God and each other requires a government that will seek justice in all it does.

The primary point I want to make in this exposition of Psalm 8 is that the only context in which an Israelite could conceivably understand this Psalmist's proclamation that God has given dominion to humans over nature would be for that Israelite to liken our responsibility toward nature to the responsibility the Israelite king has to his nation. And that means, not domination and exploitation of nature, but rather assuming responsibility for its care and stewardship! That means treating the environment with justice! Thus, being given "dominion" is for humanity to become "vice-regent" of God's creation by continuing to participate in the ongoing act of creation by taking care of that environment, not exploiting it!

It is in the light of this significant assignment to humanity to be stewards of God's world that the Psalmist can then proclaim, "O Lord, our Sovereign (that is, king of the Universe as humans are kings of justice over their environment), how majestic is your name in all the earth"!

Matthew 28:16-20 is Matthew's "Great Commission": It tells us that the eleven disciples have gathered on a mountain in Galilee where Jesus appears to them. He commissions them for their mission, saying to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (vss. 18-20).

What is a "commission"? In the larger Roman world, a commission was a call by a god or by a leader to a particular course of action. In the New Testament, it takes on more precise meaning as the call by Jesus to an imperative function of ministry. A commission is not an optional activity which the Church can choose to undertake. It is an imperative of ministry, a trust and responsibility which must shape both the Church's conceptual framework and praxis of ministry.

There are a number of commissions presented in the New Testament given by both its apostolic leaders and by Jesus. In fact, there are four Gospel commissions, one for each Gospel (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-18; Luke 4:18-19; John 20:21-23). It is simply that the commission in Matthew has become to the Church its best-known commission.

As implied in the second paragraph, however, commissions were not peculiar to Jesus and the Church. Emperors, kings and military commanders regularly gave commissions to their followers. But of particular significance to Matthew were those commissions given by the gods to Rome and/or to the Roman emperor of the day which called upon those addressed to extend the priorities and influence of Rome. Roman literature, for example, is replete with commissions given by a chief god like Jupiter to Rome to extend Roman domination and military superiority upon the entire world (e.g., Virgil's *Aeneid*, 6:851-853).

What is significant about Jesus' commission given to the Church in the Gospel of Matthew is that it follows the form of a Roman commission, but with entirely different content. Rather than being commissioned to worldwide dominance and the extension of the Roman hegemony around the world, the Church is commissioned to extend the empire of God around the world, an empire of political justice, economic equity, elimination of poverty, and communion with God through Jesus. It requires the persuasion of people to embrace this kingdom ("make disciples"), not the use of military force. It calls them into an inclusive community in which Jesus' presence is alive and active, not absent and theoretical. Disciples of Jesus are called to both proclaim and to live out the political, economic and spiritual imperatives of God's kingdom. So it is an empire of choice, of persuasion and of embrace, not an empire built at the point of a spear!

But the Great Commission of Matthew's Gospel is also the denouement of this book. It is the final action in this book that both draws this book to a close (literally; there are no words that follow the Great Commission – not even a mention of Jesus ascending into heaven!) and to the fulfillment and completion of its main argument. That main argument has been that Jesus is the Messiah – the fulfillment of the Law. Yet, as the Messiah, Jesus is also marginalized by both the leaders and the authorities of Israel. Matthew has developed that argument carefully throughout the entirety of his Gospel. And now it reaches its conclusion and apex in the Great Commission.

How has Matthew demonstrated that Jesus is the Messiah? There is more Old Testament scripture quoted or referenced in Matthew than in any other gospel narrative, all dealing with the predicted Messiah and how Jesus meets those qualifications. Jesus is presented throughout this gospel as the fulfillment of the Law. Thus, its opening genealogy traces Jesus' lineage to Abraham and then quotes Isaiah 7:14 and 9:6 to indicate that this Jesus is born to be "Emmanuel" – "God With Us". Each ensuing chapter of Matthew (except, perhaps chapter 14) contains Old Testament references or Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah, obviously demonstrating that Jesus is the fulfillment of that prophecy. And the gospel account ends with the Great Commission – itself dependent upon Psalm 22:27, Isaiah 49:6 and 22; Isa. 52:10; Daniel 7:13; Hosea 2:23, Micah 4:2 and Malachi 1:11.

But the clearest indication of the Jewish focus of Matthew is its central pericope – the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7). This collection of Jesus' sayings is, in essence, the setting-forth of a new Law. This is dramatically presented in a series of comparisons of the Law of Moses and the Law of Jesus. "You have heard that it was said (in the Law), 'Do no murder'. But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother, you will be liable to judgment" (Mt. 5:21-22). If you treat people contemptuously, you are murdering them, Jesus insisted.

The Law says, "Do not commit adultery". But Jesus calls his followers to live by the recognition that to look at any human being with lust is an act of rape (vv. 27-30). The Law says, "Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce". Jesus insists that his disciples must recognize divorce as the destruction of human relationships and therefore inappropriate for Christians (vv. 31-32). The Law says, "Do not break your oath". But Jesus calls Christians to operate, not by promised intentions, but by direct and transparent actions (vv. 33-37). The Law says, "Eye for eye and tooth for tooth". Jesus expects those who follow him to live with a spirit of forgiveness, not of retribution (vv. 38-42). The Law says, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy". Jesus calls his disciples to build their society on compassionate concern for all its

people – and in particular the enemy -- irrespective of how one might feel about any of them (vv. 43-48).

According to Matthew, Jesus' people are called to a higher Law, one which calls them to be compassionately involved with the poor and needy (6:1-4), practicing a life of intercessory prayer (vv. 5-15), committed to personal spiritual formation (vv. 16-18) and living out of an unobtrusive spirit (vv. 1-18). Jesus' people have decided not to pursue unilateral power (7:15-23), prestige (6:16-18), the accumulation of possessions (6:24-34) or the advocacy of their own little cause to the exclusion of all others (7:1-6, 13-14). Because they are living by this higher Law of Jesus, they will be free of worry (6:25-34) and the need to live judgmental lives (7:1-6). Instead, they will live open and receptive lives (7:7-12). This is the new Law to which God's people are being called, the Law of Jesus that supersedes even the Law of the scribes and Pharisees.

But if Jesus is the Messiah, he is the marginalized Messiah. All of the Gospel of Matthew describes Jesus as being ostracized, criticized and as seeking to be eliminated by "the Powers that Be". Even as a baby, he is hunted and threatened by death by Israel's king while being worshipped by Gentile wise men. He is promised by Satan "all the kingdoms of the world" if he will but cooperate with the political and economic powers that operate by oppressing and exploiting the people. He begins his ministry at the geographic edges of Palestine, and builds a constituency from the "outside in", with opposition to him increasing the closer he draws to Jerusalem. He is received enthusiastically and exuberantly by the poor, but with cynicism and the effort to repudiate him by Israel's leaders. He is obviously hated by the political, economic and religious leaders of Israel (the priests, Sadducees and Pharisees) and plotted against, as they seek first to disparage him, then to expose him and finally, to kill him. And he battles against these "Powers that Be", publicly confronting them, exposing their hypocrisy and their use of the Law to build their own power and greed, and calling them to repentance. He is finally executed by these "Powers", in partnership with Rome, as a revolutionary seeking to overthrow Roman authority. And even after his resurrection, those Powers decide to cover up that resurrection rather than to have to publicly acknowledge that they had been wrong. All of his ministry, Matthew portrays Jesus as the marginalized Messiah.

To understand the Gospel of Matthew from the perspective of Jesus portrayed as the Marginalized Messiah is to perceive Matthew's "Great Commission" as being Jesus' call to his disciples to found a New Israel, learning, following and obeying a new Law. The New Israel would not be made up of a people who are born Jewish but who embrace the New Israel of God – whether Jew or Gentile. They are made up of those who celebrate Jesus as God's true Messiah and join a community of faith centered around that Jesus. The essential task of the Church, Matthew insists, is to make disciples for Jesus from those who were once disciples of Moses or of Caesar. When one embraces that new Law and new life, Matthew teaches, one will discover the "Great I Am" in the person of Jesus the Messiah.

Finally, what does Matthew 28:16-20 have to do with Trinity Sunday? It has everything to do with it, because it is one of only two places in scripture which unambiguously presents God as One but in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit (the other being II Cor. 13:14). Matthew wrote, "baptizing (disciples) in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit".

There are many intuitions of God as three persons (e.g., I Cor. 12:4-8; II Cor. 13:14; I Pet. 1:2; John 14:16-17, 26-27; 15:26). And there are places where the Trinity is presented in person (e.g., in Jesus' baptism with God the Father represented in the voice from heaven, the Son in person and the Spirit in the dove; e.g. Matt. 3:16-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22). But this is one of only two places where the Trinitarian formula is actually used. And here in Matthew, what makes it particularly important is that this formula is given as an integral part of the process of turning people from disciples in Moses (or to some other leader or god) to disciples of Jesus and, consequently, Yahweh!

II Corinthians 13:11-14 is the close of the second letter of Paul to the Corinthian Church. It consists of a final greeting, final instructions and a closing benediction. The greeting is simplicity itself: "Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell" (13:11a).

The final instructions are equally brief and predictable: "Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you" (13:11b-13). Given that the central issue of the Corinthian Church is its division into competing and even warring parties that both alienate the church from one another and destroy a credible witness to the city, Paul's closing instructions are exactly what one would expect. "Put things in order" actually has the sense, in Greek, of "aim for restoration" of their fellowship in Christ. "Listen to my appeal" can also be translated "encourage one another" – which seems much more appropriate to the primary message of the two letters. But the real gist of these final instructions is caught up in the words, "agree with one another; live in peace (with one another)", which is manifested through the act of "greet one another with a holy kiss". That is, the primary task of this church is not so much to contend for the purity of the church (that will lead only to further schism) but to its peace and unity, instead.

Paul then brings his letter to conclusion with the benediction. It is the only threefold benediction to appear in the Bible: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (vs. 14). It is a most fitting benediction for the Church to remember on Trinity Sunday. And it is the primary benediction that has now moved into the warp-and-woof of the Church throughout the whole world!

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