

# Christ the King – Epistle

## EXTREME POLITICS

### Revelation 1:4b-8

### Christ the King (Proper 29)

### Analysis by Jerome Burce

4b Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, 6 and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. 7 Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. 8 'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

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## DIAGNOSIS: Ululation

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** – *See the Tribes Snarl*

The tribes (v. 7) are us. Lest any be in pretentious first-world doubt about this, try the following thought experiment: an Oval Office counselor, addressing a crowd of Protestant evangelicals, sprinkles his remarks with echoes of this text and so gets caught on tape extolling the world's Christocratic destiny (v. 6; "dominion" = Gk. *kratos*, as in *aristo-crat*, *demo-crat*, etc.). Pressed to disavow his advisor's comments, the President

refuses. Who can doubt what happens next? Headlines shriek. Pundits rant. Demonstrators mass at the White House gates. Within the churches millions applaud and millions wince, all piously, with the veneer of theological conviction, and all hypocritically, the applauding and wincing arising not nearly so much from thought and theology as from the deeper reflexes of socioeconomic alignment and cultural identity. Precisely so do we manifest the tribal instincts of our ancestors, which we have not lost. It's as if to be human is to cluster and contend, group against group, the groups defined only sometimes by blood and ancestry, always by a common interest in exercising that dominion over other creatures which is part and parcel of the skewed image of God we continue to bear. When that dominion is threatened we bare our fangs, collectively. In Jesus' own end time visions the wailing of v. 7 is always accompanied by the gnashing of teeth. One might say, then, that the future is now.

## **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** – *See the Tribes Quake*

In the experiment above, why are Christian mainliners leagued in a sort of super-tribe with left-wing agnostics? Because both dread the dominion, not of Christ, but of Bible-beating Southern Baptists. For their part the Baptists will swallow hard and embrace Pat Buchanan Catholics if only to keep the lefties at bay. The key ingredient on both sides of the contest is fear; and as Scripture everywhere attests, fear of anything other than God is a failure of faith in God (for but two examples among hundreds see Mk. 4:40, Rev. 13:4). In this post-Easter age the God we don't believe or trust is the God who, in Christ, "freed us from our sins by his blood" (v. 5b). Consider that assertion. Who gives it the credit it deserves and demands? Not agnostics, nor the otherly-religioned. But then neither do Christians. Why else the intra-tribal rivalries? Why else the blind certainty of both mainline and evangelical that a dominion of the other

entails the beastly prospect (ch. 13) of domination by the other? So also with the older contests, Orthodox vs. Catholic, Catholic vs. Protestant, Lutheran vs. Reformed, etc. Common to all is an assumption that the other tribe is a band of Satan's slaves, abounding in sin, murder, and sundry wickedness. Of some tribes on earth this is assuredly true as the slaughters of the past century attest. But to think it true of all tribes, and worse, to assume it of sub-tribes which, like one's own, bear the sign of "the faithful witness," is to mock that witness. This is one way—there are countless more—by which we pierce Christ anew with our unbelief (v. 7).

### **Step 3: Advanced Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Hear the Tribes Lament**

Hence the wailing that is bound to erupt from every throat when Christ appears in his glory. There is no exclusion here for Christian throats, and for several reasons. First, to see him in that day is to see Power as Power has never been seen before; for he comes openly, nakedly, as "ruler of the kings of the earth" (v. 5), as enveloping, all-containing Alpha and Omega of every power ever exercised since creation's dawn. He comes, in a word, as Pantocrat, that straight turning of the Greek which brings fresh oomph to the stale English "Almighty" (v. 8). The very sight is bound to cow and awe and elicit terror, all the more when, second, it instantly exposes the absurdity of those tribal configurations to which sinners keep clinging for strength and safety. Now each is out in the open—each Christian too—one by one encountering the fullness of deity, righteous and irresistible, from whom flight and concealment are options no longer. This One, third, has bones to pick, beginning not with the heathen but with his churches (2:1 – 3:22). Those bones include our failure to love each other (2:4) and our shabby alliances (2:14-15). Anyone ever faced by this Power and Judgment Unmasked, if only in a vision, has fallen down dead or

the next thing thereto It happened to Isaiah (Is. 6), to shepherds in the field (Lk. 2), to Peter (Lk. 5), to Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9), to John of Patmos (1:17). It will happen to us.

## **PROGNOSIS: Jubilation**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Post-Tribal Life***

Now comes the great surprise. The One who will scare us each to death—justifiably so—will also love us each (v. 5b) into brand new life, and again justifiably, He Himself having underwritten the justice of it. Recall heaven's own verdict: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered" to receive anything and everything he desires (5:12). If that includes a desire to give life to the unworthy and the rightfully dead, so be it; with right and might like his who can argue? Notice now his right hand on the shoulder of John of Patmos (1:17). What is this if not the promise of that same hand on my shoulder and yours? "I was dead" he will say (1:18), not bothering to add that he died on our account. How so? Because ours were the hands that, in piercing him, unwittingly enabled him to lay his own hands on "the keys of Death and of Hades" (1:18), the very things he was born and crucified to acquire. Having gotten them he will turn them on our behalf, to our everlasting benefit. "Don't be afraid," he tells us (1:17). How can we be? For however breathtaking is his power, more breathtaking by far is the grace (v. 4) with which he wields it—and not for our one-on-one sake only, or for our particular tribe, but for the sake of "every tribe and language and people and nation" (5:9).

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Post-Tribal Liberty***

This said—or more to the point, this believed, what left to fear? Assume for a moment that our worst suspicions of the tribal other should happen to be true (they aren't, but play along anyway): that mainliners, for example, are nothing more

than Communists in drag, or that evangelicals are busy plotting to turn all America into Calvin's joyless Geneva, no dissenters allowed. Can either extremity, coming to pass, void the ultimate extreme of Christ's power and mercy? To know Christ is to know the answer. But to know Christ is also to understand that we rightly speak of him not only in past and future tenses, but in the present tense as well (v. 4b, 8). This means that we live even now under the quiet dominion of Christocracy-in-the-making. Even now he flexes his might, wondrously, through incessant initiatives of grace and peace (v. 4b). Finding us to be sinners, he declares us to be saints—and treats us accordingly. When people trust this they start to mimic it, loving the erstwhile enemy not only as Christ has loved us but, better still, as Christ still loves them. Then the word "he freed us from our sins" gets preached in the flesh and blood of real deeds and genuine attitudes; and a whiff of ultimate liberty starts wafting through the world.

#### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *The Post-Tribal Anthem***

Essential to this liberty is a brand new understanding of what wise politics and the ultimate political order are all about. Be it underscored in all the churches that Christ calls us to embrace this understanding with gusto. Christocracy is not a gruesome threat but a wild, wonderful promise, a regime of mighty grace and everlasting peace. It falls presently to some—those who know and trust Jesus—to make this plain. To that end Christ "has made to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father." So writes the seer (v. 6), echoing Peter (1 Pet. 2:5, 9), who in turn has filled an Old Testament text (Ex. 19:6) with Christian content. From many tribes he makes one kingdom. Out of many "thems" he forms a single, priestly "us" whose function is to serve as we ourselves have been served, sacrificially, so as to convey God's mercy in Christ to those

who need it. This is what priests do—all priests, i.e. the baptized, not merely the ordained. To tribal neighbors they are little Christs. In those same tribal neighbors they find Christ. So they eschew snarling. Instead they fill the present with the song of the future, the anthem of kingdom come: Worthy is the Lamb...whose dominion is never domination, but always grace and peace and love in doses strong enough to keep us brimming with life and joy forever. It's a catchy song—so catchy that out of every tribe there are some who sing it already. If only we'll listen. If only on hearing we'll sing along.