

Christ the King Sunday

COSMOPOLITICAL VISIONS

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

Christ the King Sunday

Analysis by Jerome Burce

9 As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire. 10 A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. 13 As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. 14 To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

Note: Context is crucial to grasping this text. Let no one tackle it without reading all of Daniel 7 first.

DIAGNOSIS: Everyone's Worst Nightmare

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Skeptics*

"Good news!" says Daniel. "Today's nightmare gives way at last to tomorrow's dream world when a human being will be in charge, not the beasts that plague us now. That's God promise, and he will do it!" (vv. 2-6). Will this Sunday's hearers be impressed?

Not likely. Take Danielle, for example, seated in a pew on the far right where she's steeped to the gills in fears about U.N.-engendered "one-world government" and the messianic pretensions of Barack Obama. Or consider Dan, her counterpart on the left, his nose sensitized to the beastly odors of patriarchy, subservience, and monocultural Christian arrogance. As the reader rolls out their namesake's ancient vision Dan will squirm, Danielle will blanch. Well, of course they will. If they're listening, that is.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *"They're All Crooks!"*

After all, among the few things Dan and Danielle will agree on is Lord Acton's aphorism about power: It always corrupts; and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Each will think old Daniel naive in his Maccabean-era assumption that a man—any man, the holy Torah-keeper included (see vv. 18, 27)—can avoid this corruption. Both will point to copious examples, most horrifically in the 20th century, where dream-spinning people used unchecked authority to curse the planet and devour their own people. Both participate in a bedrock assumption of the age, that imperium of any kind is a font of evil, none more so than the varieties fed by ideology and religion. "Any religion," says Dan. "The wrong religion," says Danielle, by which she means anything other than the particular sliver of American Christianity that she battens on herself. Comes the sigh of relief. "At least we're better off today than our namesake was. He lived the imperial nightmare. We don't. Not yet at least. Thank God we're Americans, as in free; in servitude to no one."

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Beast of Beasts*

"And to think," scoffs Daniel, "that you call me naive." He speaks, of course, from other and older assumptions about absolute power and the hold it has on us. "Guess what, kids, it's real. It's there. It can't be dodged or pretended away. It

governs already—always has, always will, your world as much as mine. It hovers in the night unseen except in the rare and terrible visions it grants to the likes of me (vv. 13, 15).” Today’s fear-mongers prattle on about global conspiracies. Daniel the Seer testifies to something grimmer by far, a Cosmic Inspiracy (to coin a term), where the “Ancient One” (vv. 9, 13, 22), a.k.a. God, both authorizes and animates the superficial powers we deal with day by day, be these beastly or human, tyrannical or democratic. Thus the import of the passive verbs at vv. 3, 4 and 5, or the semi-passive “received” of v. 14. To loathe power per se is to loathe God. To dread pervasive power in human hands is to lodge a complaint against the One who puts it there. “So be it,” says Dan the impudent lefty, his lack of reverence finding an odd-though-unmistakable echo in the desperate piety that drives Danielle to dissociate her god from any and every authority she fears and dislikes. Both of them are in trouble. Absolute Power does not take kindly to rebels, be they open or furtive. Somewhere in the books of that cosmic court (v. 10) are notes on their sedition.

PROGNOSIS: The Dawning Dream

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *King of Kings*

Truth-telling Daniel is not a rebel. Like the great prophets before him he keeps counting on saving outcomes from the God behind the beasts. Can Dan and Danielle do the same? Only if the Ancient One should turn what Daniel sees into something quite different than Daniel imagines; only, that is, if the reign of the “one like a human being” (v. 13) means something more than an everlasting rule of circumcised Torah-keepers (again, vv. 18, 27). Some “what-ifs”: What if God should use his absolute power to turn the very concept of power on its head? What if God should use his might, not to enforce obedience but to win it? What if God should himself suffer the consequences of putting beasts in charge? What if he should use his almighty resources

to absorb, not punish, the wrath and dismay those beasts of his engender? What if the one like a human being should turn out to be The One in the form of a crushed and broken human being? And what if the moment of That One's utter collapse should trigger an eruption of God's power at its most astonishing, one that raises the dead and grants the Dead-One-Now-Living the right to fix the cosmic books by erasing every trace of our sedition? Think of it: fixing the books. Isn't that what corrupt power always does, to its own benefit? What if that very act should turn out to be an example of absolute power at its perfect best, excercised for the benefit of all? But enough already with the what-iffing. Daniel, meet Jesus.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *"Hooray for the Autocrat!"*

That said, it's time for Dan and Danielle to meet Jesus too, all over again, only this time as power personified. Isn't that what this Sunday's preaching is finally about, to invite hearers to relish the wonder of an autocrat they can trust? The very invitation will let him flex his power in the gentle forms he prefers to use with us these days, the persuasion of his word-borne Spirit on the one hand coupled with his own embrace in the sacramental eating and drinking. Let the preacher note how the week-after-week steadiness of these things is a hint in present time of his "everlasting dominion." So is the profusion of "peoples, nations, and languages" with whom he consorts on any given Sunday (v. 14). His aim with all of them is the same: to win their loyal assent to his project of keeping the books scrubbed clean on their behalf against the day when he'll raise them from the dead "incorruptible," to quote another of his seers (1 Cor. 15:52, KJV). Will Dan hear this? Will Danielle? If so, perhaps they'll start this Sunday to revise their assumptions that power can only corrupt, or that imperium is always a curse. Or put it this way: perhaps they'll follow their

namesake's lead and start hoping in God.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Servants*

Better still, would be to watch all who tune in this Sunday as they shake off their fears and suspicions and get merrily about the business of demonstrating the dominion of Christ their Lord. Philip Melanchthon has a telling line in his Apology, Article IV: "Good works ARE the reign of Christ" (emphasis added), and by good works he means anything that springs from a Daniel-like confidence in the God behind the beasts. Some things that qualify: Daniel daring to put his vision into writing. Danielle resolving to quit wasting time and psychic energy on searching the internet for the latest in dark doings, and to pour it instead into someone Jesus died for—a child, say, who needs a tutor. Or how about Dan embracing the notion that the patriarchy of God isn't such a bad idea after all, or again that he's called by baptism to a life of glorious subservience, as in service under the Servant and in the Servant's name, the kind of service that crackles with power to forgive sins, raise the dead, defang the beasts, and shape the world's destiny. Imagine Dan exulting in Christ's dominion as he spends himself in ways both large and small on the lives of those around him. Though come to think of it, let's do more than imagine this. Let's notice it, observe it, remark on it, praise God for it. Already, even now, all over the world, the ancient dream is coming true.