

Restoring Order

In the name of him to whom all things have been made subject, dear friends in Christ: As a pastor, one of the most common reasons that people give me for doubting or not believing in the Lord God has to do with the question of evil. They want to know how it is that if God is truly good and that he is all powerful as we assert, then why are things so messed up? How do we account for all the problems in the world? Why do crime and cruelty and disease and disaster and death exist if we are, as the Scriptures declare, the special creation of a loving and merciful God? Perhaps you too have heard these objections. What always surprises me is that whenever someone throws this argument at me, they act as if they're the first ones who thought of it, and that no one within the realm of Christendom ever noticed what seems to them to be such a crippling inconsistency in the teachings of the Church.

But anyone who's actually read the Bible knows that the answer to this objection isn't hard to find at all. In fact, it's what most of the Bible is about. Yes, we believe in a good and all powerful God. *And* we believe that things are messed up – not at all as they are supposed to be. Scripture doesn't deny this. It teaches it. And it teaches *why* things are the way they are, *and* what God has done, is doing, and what he will yet do to set things back in order so that things will be, once again, the way they should be.

Over the past few weeks in the Thursday morning Bible study (to which you are all invited), we've been going over the Genesis account of Creation. And we saw how God in his infinite wisdom and love made all things, set them in their places, assigned to them their tasks – and how all of it was very good. Everything in Creation was working together in perfect harmony. And then, for the capstone of his Creation, God made mankind in his own image. And he set them, our first parents, as his representatives over all that he had made. To them he gave dominion in order that they might serve the Creation as its rulers to continue the work of maintaining order and peace and harmony. Yes, even in a perfect world, someone needs to be in charge. And that's what you had, a perfect chain of command: God on top, mankind as his second in command and executive officers, and everything else under them in perfect order.

We saw too that part of what it means to bear God's image is having the capacity to love. God is love. And therefore his representatives on earth had to be able to love even as God does. And when I say love in this context, I don't mean feelings of affection. That's not what we're talking about. No, love, biblically speaking, is voluntary self-sacrificial devotion. It's a voluntary commitment to serve. Love says "What can I do to serve you?" without taking into account the cost or obligation to me. It's a beautiful thing. It's a godly thing. And for it to be love, it must be voluntary. You have to want to do it. To be forced to serve and sacrifice unwillingly is slavery. God made mankind free; free to love as he loves. And that necessarily means that mankind was free to choose not to love, to choose not to serve for the good of others and all creation, and to choose rather to serve themselves.

And, of course, that is the choice our first parents made. When tempted, they chose to listen to the voice of Satan rather than to the voice of God. They chose to try to become like God – they attempted to usurp his authority and position over them. And in so doing, they chose to break God's perfect order, to reject their exalted place in it, and to choose for themselves another leader: namely Satan. They gave their allegiance and their trust to him. And so they fell.

And with them they caused everything that was ordered under their authority to fall also. All of Creation fell under the curse of sin, of death, of decay, of disorder, and of chaos. On the day that they sinned, our first parents died spiritually by breaking their special relationship with God. And later they died physically: the soul and body God put together so perfectly in them in one marvelous, properly ordered unity was wrenched apart. And as we heard in today's Epistle, they passed this curse down to their descendants. In Adam all are dying. It is not good. The Creation is not functioning as it was designed to. And at no time do we see this more clearly and painfully – that things in this world are not as they ought to be – as when close the casket on one of our loved ones and seal their lifeless body in the grave. Then, to all appearances, it's over. Then, it seems, the end has come and nothing will ever be right again. And how, the world asks, could a loving and all powerful God permit such a thing?

The answer is that it's not the end. God isn't done yet. When I was in the Army, the chief warrant officer who was in charge of the motor pool and all the mechanics in a battalion in which I served had a motto. It was this: "You broke it. You fix it." It wasn't very helpful. And we can be eternally grateful that this is not the Lord's policy. He knew very well that fallen mankind could never fix what was broken as a result of their sin. The Lord knew he would have to do the job himself. And ever since the fall, as we through our sins have turned farther and farther away from him, he's been pursuing a very orderly, step by step process to restore Creation to its proper order and put things right again.

This is what St. Paul is saying in today's Epistle. Yes, through Adam, the first man, the curse of sin and death passed to all. And so God chose to send a second man – one who was also his own divine Son born as a man into the fallen world – through whom all would be made alive again. He did what we could not do. He lived a perfect life of love. And then, in love, he voluntarily sacrificed his perfect life as a sin offering, paying the debt of suffering and death we owe on account of our sins.

And God accepted his sacrifice on our behalf. We know because death could not hold him. If there were one sin that remained held against him, he would still be subject to the curse of death and he could not have risen. But, as Paul says, "in fact Christ *has* been raised from the dead". It means that its curse is cancelled and that death's power to hold anyone has been overturned. This is why Paul calls Jesus the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. Just as the first ripened fruit tells you that the main harvest is on the way, so also the resurrection of Jesus proves that in the end, at God's appointed harvest time when Christ comes, all those who are in their graves will also rise again in their bodies.

At that time, Paul explains, Jesus will destroy every rule and authority and power to which we and all the rest of Creation have been subject on account of sin's curse. Then there will be no more decay, no more disease, no more conflict, no more persecution of the faithful; Satan and his demonic allies together with all the enemies of God's truth will be overthrown and cast into the eternal fire prepared for them. And the last enemy to be destroyed is death. Its power to threaten or hurt God's faithful in any way will permanently be removed.

And Creation itself will be restored to its proper order with God the Father on top where he belongs, with Christ his Son and our Savior, the man placed in charge; and with all the rest of God's people – the ones who while living on this fallen earth trusted in God's promises to save and redeem by his Son – they will rule over the new heavens and the new earth with Christ as their king. And everything will be exactly as it ought to be: perfect and in order – just as our good and loving God intended.

A hackneyed old proverb says that all good things must come to an end. It's not true. According to Holy Scripture, it's only the bad things that must end. And they will. And when their end comes there is going to be for us a new beginning. We will experience all the good things that the Lord has planned for us forever. What will that be like? Scripture does not say. What it does say that no human eye has seen nor has it entered into the heart of any man the good things that God has prepared for those who love him.

Therefore in the midst of this fallen world with all of its problems, let us place our trust and hope in Christ Jesus who for us defeated death. Let's continue to feed our holy faith by hearing his Word and receiving his body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar. Let's allow the Holy Spirit to order our lives that we may be reordered in the image of God. Let's make it our goal to expand the reach of Christ's kingdom by sharing this good news we have heard. And let's look forward with thankfulness and heartfelt praise to the final restoration that God has promised to us through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!