

Under New Management

In the name of him for whose coming in glory we wait with eager expectation, dear friends in Christ: From time to time when going into a restaurant you'll see sign that proudly declares "Under New Management". It indicates that ownership of the place has changed or perhaps that the old owner has hired a new manager and staff to run the place. It also means that you can expect to see changes in things like the menu, the quality of service, and maybe the décor. In my experience these changes may be for better or for worse – you won't know until you sit down and get served.

Earlier this month we had a national election. Maybe you heard about it? Anyway, as a result of this election it now appears that a little more than half way through January these United States of America will be under new management. And if we are to believe what's being said by the good folks at NPR and mainstream media outlets, when that happens we are to expect nothing short of a miraculous rebirth of the nation. It will be the dawn of a new age: all of our longstanding problems solved, our wars ended, our enemies made friends, the current pandemic happily and almost instantly resolved, all differences reconciled, racism a thing of the dark past, peace, universal prosperity, free education and medical coverage for all – it will be paradise on earth. Or so we are being told.

I am less optimistic. In this fallen world full of sinners with only fallen sinners available to elect as leaders we can only expect more of the same. Sure, the pendulum swings back and forth toward more progressive or conservative policies depending on who's running the show at any moment, but the checks and balances built into the system ensure that it swings slowly and prevent it from going too far one way or the other. Using my limited powers of prophecy I have two predictions about how things will be when we are under new management. First that our problems will *not* away. We will still have unemployment and pandemics and wars and racism and crime and violence and people living in poverty and expensive health care and corrupt politicians and an ever increasing national debt. Some things may get a bit better. Some things may get worse – much worse. But paradise on earth? Forget it. It ain't gonna happen; not yet, anyway. My second prediction is this: when the promised paradise on earth fails to appear, any and all problems will be blamed on the previous administration. That's the way it works in this fallen world. But it was wise King Solomon who observed, "In this fallen world even bad government is better than no government". *That* would be chaos.

And speaking of bad government, it's nothing new. God's people in ancient times experienced it too. That's what today's reading from the prophet Ezekiel is about. In the paragraphs leading up to the text we heard, the Lord declares that he has set himself against the shepherds of his people. And when he speaks of shepherds he means both the political leaders who made disastrous decisions regarding national security, trusting in their own foolish human wit and wisdom rather than in the Lord, and also the religious leaders who led the people into idolatry and great vice and shameful behavior. Together these bad shepherds with their faithlessness and bad leadership drove Judah to ruin. Things got so bad that the Lord was left with no other option than to destroy the nation entirely and have its people carried off into exile in foreign lands. This was his nuclear option, so to speak, to finally break their stubborn and rebellious spirits and bring them to repentance and faith in him so that he could start over and rebuild the nation again from scratch.

That's what we hear the Lord saying in the text. You bad shepherds broke it. Now *I'm* going to fix it. I'm placing you under new management. "I, I myself will search for my sheep

and seek them out ... I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered ... I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them into their own land ... [there] I will feed them ... on rich pasture ... and make them lie down ... I will seek the lost and bring back the strayed and bind up the injured and strengthen the weak ... I will feed them in justice.” It’s like he’s saying “If I want the job done right, I will have to do it myself.” And, of course, for the Lord that’s absolutely true. No individual sinful human or group of sinful humans can fix the problems with God’s people. He has to do it himself. And that’s good news for God’s people – including us.

Now, what’s fascinating about this text is that it has three distinct fulfillments: initially a comparatively small and partial one, later a much bigger and fuller one, and in the end a grand and glorious finale. The first small and partial one came at the end of the exile. The foreign empire the Lord had used to destroy the nation of Judah and scatter its people was itself destroyed by the empire of Persia. At the Lord’s direction, the ancient civilized world was placed under new management. The Lord then moved the Persian King, a man named Cyrus, to order the recreation of the Jewish nation. It was unheard of in history: the resurrection of a dead nation; but that’s what happened.

Under the leadership of Zerubbabel, a faithful man who was a direct descendant of King David, Jews who had been scattered in exile returned to their homeland. And under the direction of faithful priests like Ezra and others, and faithful prophets like Haggai, the Lord’s temple was rebuilt and the proper worship of the One True God restored. Yes, these new shepherds were fallen and sinful men, but clearly the Lord was acting through them to fulfill his promises – albeit only in part.

The second much bigger fulfillment of these promises began when God the Son came down from heaven and took on human flesh in the person of Jesus, who was himself another direct descendant of King David. In his ministry we see him doing the very things prophesied: seeking out the lost sheep of the house of Israel, healing the injured, strengthening the weak, calling sinners to repentance and faith in him. We see him feeding his sheep with the Words of eternal life. We see him also judging between the strong and weak, that is he condemns the self-righteous and oppressors of the poor, and raises up the meek and the humble who come to him in need of healing and forgiveness.

We also see him solving the biggest threat to God’s people: the curse of sin and death that infects us all. He did it by his mock coronation with a crown of thorns and his throne of horror and suffering – the cross. There he was declared “King of the Jews”. And there he died the Lamb of God who by his death takes away the sin of the world.

It was upon his resurrection and subsequent ascension that he was crowned for real, this time with glory, and he was given dominion over all. God placed the world under new management; but again, we see this only in partial fulfillment. Sin and Satan still have much influence among the kingdoms of men; but in the Church, the kingdom of God, Christ is the undisputed ruler. And through his appointed under-shepherds he continues to do the things he began in his earthly ministry: gathering his lost and scattered sheep from all corners of the globe, feeding them with the Bread of Life, binding up their wounded hearts and minds, and uniting them with himself in the one, true, holy and apostolic Church – God’s kingdom on earth. Is it perfect? No, not yet. It can’t be as long as he’s doing his work through sinful humans. Even his best under-shepherds are at heart bad shepherds. They need to confess their sins and receive his forgiveness like anyone else.

We pray that they continue to do so as we await the complete and final fulfillment of the promises the Lord made through the prophet Ezekiel in today's text. That will happen on the day described in today's Gospel, when Jesus comes in glory, the dead are raised, the living transformed, and all stand before him in judgment. Then there will be no question: it will be plainly obvious that we are all under new management – for better or for worse. For his faithful sheep gathered at his right hand it will be infinitely better; for the goats on his left, infinitely worse.

But for his faithful we will truly have what the pundits falsely promise now. There will be Paradise on Earth. God the Father will reign supreme and he will set one Shepherd over us, his "David" as he is called in the text. But don't let that confuse you; it simply means "Beloved". It's being used here as a title, not a name. The Father's "David" is his beloved Son Jesus Christ. *He* will feed us and be our Shepherd. And he will be Prince among us forever.

The first fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy is a matter of recorded human history. It happened. The second fulfillment is both a matter of history and continues to go on in the present. We are witnessing it ourselves. The final fulfillment is yet to come. We wait for it with eager expectation knowing for certain that it must come for the Lord has spoken and he always keeps his Word. Therefore we pray, "In accordance with your unfailing Word, come Lord Jesus. Place us under your new management. In your holy name. Amen."

Soli Deo Gloria!