

Wednesday in the Last Week after Pentecost

November 25, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year Two, Proper 29: Revelation 13:1–10; Psalm 98:1–4*; Luke 21:10–19*

Scholars know that around the end of the ninth century or the beginning of the tenth century, monastic workshops began to put the prayers and lessons for Advent Sundays at the front of the new liturgical books which they were making.¹ Scholars do not know why this was done, but because of the way books were laid out, Advent would come to be thought of by Christians in the West as the beginning of the church year, instead of its conclusion.

In 1925, Pope Pius XI, still a so-called “prisoner of the Vatican,” decreed a new feast for the last Sunday in October, the Feast of Christ the King. In 1969, with the new three-year Sunday Mass cycle, the Roman Catholic Church moved Christ the King to the Sunday before Advent. The Episcopal Church uses the readings for the kingship of Christ, but not the official title. My hunch is that in the 1970s, Anglican scholars generally knew that Pius XI’s feast was about God exercising sovereignty over humankind through the

¹ Adolf Adam, *The Liturgical Year: Its History & Its Meaning After the Reform of the Liturgy*, trans. Matthew O’Connell (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1981), 28.

office of the bishop of Rome.² The late Raymond Brown thought that the Advent Sunday gospels should be the narratives Matthew and Luke use to introduce their stories of Jesus' birth. Instead, the church year begins with a Sunday on about Christ's second coming at the end of time.³

The weekday lectionary for the last weeks of the year reflect a consideration of Christ's return. Yesterday we heard of the war in heaven. Satan was cast down to the earth and given power. Today we heard a lesson from the Revelation to John that is never heard on a Sunday or feast day. There's one verse here that has troubled many through the centuries: "All who dwell on earth will worship [the beast], every one whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain."⁴

² http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_11121925_quas-primas.html, (accessed 25 November 2020).

³ Raymond E. Brown, *Christ in the Gospels of the Ordinary Sundays: Essays on the Gospel Readings of the Ordinary Sundays in the Three-Year Liturgical Cycle* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 36 n. In this note Brown says we should "prepare for Christmas using a different reading type of Sunday readings." I learned from my colleague Father James Ross Smith, who was Brown's student, that he thought we should read in Advent what Matthew and Luke wrote to introduce the conception and birth of Jesus.

⁴ Revelation 13:8.

The question of predestination, one way or another, has engaged theological writers since as Origen, who died circa the year 254. Origen stressed the universal saving will of God. It's a debate that will never end. Wilfred Harrington in his commentary on Revelation quotes the late George Bradford Caird: "We must not read more into John's doctrine of predestination than he intends . . . His doctrine springs from the thoroughly biblical idea that salvation is from start to finish the unmerited act of God."⁵

In a passage that we did not hear yesterday or today, Satan, the defeated dragon who was thrown down to earth, went after the woman and her child. God saved them. But, "Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus."⁶ Thus these words today, "If any one is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if any one slays with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints."⁷

⁵ Wilfred J. Harrington, *Revelation*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008), 139; G.B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 168.

⁶ Revelation 12:17.

⁷ Revelation 13:

The struggle with evil, sickness, pain, cruelty, and unnatural death in our world continues. But on Friday and Saturday, the weekday lectionary gives us passages from the last chapters of this book, on Friday, a vision of the New Jerusalem and, on Saturday, the conclusion of the life of the world to come.⁸

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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