

### **Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14**

<sup>9</sup> 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.  
<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> 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.  
<sup>14</sup> 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.

### **Revelation 1:9-18**

<sup>9</sup> I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. <sup>10</sup> I was in the spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet <sup>11</sup> saying, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."  
<sup>12</sup> Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands,  
<sup>13</sup> and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. <sup>14</sup> His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, <sup>15</sup> his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. <sup>16</sup> In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.  
<sup>17</sup> When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, <sup>18</sup> and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.

### **Matthew 28:16-20**

*The Commissioning of the Disciples*

<sup>16</sup> Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup> When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

### Sermon: Who is really in charge?

**May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.**

A friend of mine sent me an email earlier in the week; the email included an article written by AW Tozer that was written shortly before his death which she asked me to read.

The central theme of the article is this: 'Jesus Christ has today almost no authority at all among the groups that call themselves by His name.' It's a strong indictment – Tozer isn't pulling any punches.

He goes on to write that in his estimation Jesus, the head of the church, has largely been reduced to a figurehead. When we consider the monarchy in Britain we begin to see what he's getting at. Queen Elizabeth bears many titles: she is head of the Commonwealth, Commander in Chief of the Canadian Armed Forces, Lord High Admiral of the Royal Navy, Duke of Normandy, Lord of Mann, Mother of all people (BC First Nations), Admiral in the Great Navy of the State of Nebraska (Nebraska is landlocked, but this is Nebraska's highest honor, bestowed by the Governor), Chief Hunter of the Order of the Buffalo Hunt (Canada), and (this one I quite like) Defender of the Faith. This title was first granted to Henry VIII by Pope Leo X during what was a very historically significant coronation.

The queen has many titles, many honours, and is highly visible throughout the Commonwealth. But the queen has almost no power. The queen doesn't make laws, doesn't enforce laws, in fact the queen must obey the same laws as all the other people in Britain. When it came to Brexit, the queen didn't even get to vote like everybody else did; her job as figurehead requires her to stay neutral in affairs of state. She doesn't own the country, she doesn't even own the castle she lives in – she's a figurehead who lives on an allowance. Somebody else doles out to her the money that bears her image.

Tozer writes that this is what we've done to Jesus in his own church. Jesus has become a figurehead, a pleasant symbol of unity and loyalty, much like a flag or a national anthem. Christ is our beloved symbol, but he is not really our Lord. We pay lip service to Christ, and then we move along and do as we please. We live as though we are in charge – of the world, of the church, and of our lives.

Now, I read this article, although I didn't like what I was reading, I was forced to admit that Tozer is not wrong. The idea that Jesus Christ has absolute and final authority over the whole church and over all of its members in every detail of their lives is simply not accepted as true by most Christians.

Under proper circumstances we invite Christ to say 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden' or 'Let not your heart be troubled,' but when the allotted time for devotion is finished someone else takes over. Those in actual authority decide the moral standards of the church, as well as all objectives and all methods employed to achieve them. (Tozer's words)

Christ is consulted by people with problems and sought after by those who long for peace of mind. He is widely recommended as a kind of spiritual psychiatrist with remarkable powers to straighten people out. We

welcome this accommodating Christ who is little more than a servant of the people, but once we've gotten what we desire from him, we are no longer in the mood to listen to him on other topics.

We generally don't pray to seek God's will, but instead we pray before meetings for divine help to carry out our own plans. We pray for God to give success to our efforts, but we pray with Christ as our helper, not as our Lord.

I'm not limiting this to church leadership - to elder or pastors. Which Christian among you will go to the Sermon on the Mount or some other part of the Bible for an authoritative answer to a problem? Who lets the words of Christ be final on bringing up a family, our personal habits, tithing, entertainment, buying, selling, forgiving and other such important matters? Don't we usually have a long list of reasons why what Jesus taught in the Bible doesn't really apply to us or our situations? Jesus didn't have me in mind when he said that, we tell ourselves. He meant something different.

For individuals, and for churches, what Tozer has written is all too true. We like Jesus as a figurehead, but we don't really like to obey him as our master. We like our friend Jesus, but have little time for Lord Jesus.

As I was feeling the conviction of these words in my heart, another friend arrived at the church on that very same afternoon and handed me a letter written by Thomas Torrance. This letter was written by Torrance as a letter to a younger version of himself - essentially mature Thomas writing a letter of advice to an immature Thomas. The letter opens with this: If I were starting again as a young minister entering his first charge, I would do my best to engage in a Christ-centered ministry, one in which Christ himself has supreme place over all institutions.

Jesus Christ must have supreme place over *all* institutions. This is Torrance's chief concern. Twice in the same day - the same message, both written in around the time I was born. I don't believe in coincidence - we live in a universe created with a purpose and a plan - things like this don't just happen by chance. It's time for me to sit up and take notice.

We've been working our way through Advent - I've been preaching for weeks about waiting for Jesus' return, not as the helpless infant this time, but rather as our Lord and Judge, the one who will destroy every ruler - every authority and power - and will hand over the kingdom to his Father.

Let's make no mistake - our encounter with the returning Jesus is not going to be a warm and fuzzy affair full of kumbaya's, hugs and rueful chuckling over the silly things we did with our lives. Even for believers, coming face to face with the awesome power that created the universe and knows every hair on our heads, every desire of our hearts - this will be a terrifying occasion.

A moose is scary when it's up close, a bear will make your heart skip a beat. What do you really think meeting God will be like? Daniel had a vision centuries ago - I'd like to turn to it.

Our first reading this morning came from chapter seven of Daniel's book, and though it is untraditional, I think that an apocalyptic reading for Advent is immensely appropriate. As we await the return of Christ the King, let's consider who it is we're waiting for.

Daniel's vision opens with four great beasts rising out of the sea, one after another. As tempting as it is to talk about these beasts and the more fantastical parts of the vision, that is for another time. Today I wish to focus on what takes place once these beasts rise up.

As I watched thrones were set in place, Daniel writes, and an Ancient One took his throne. His clothing was white as snow, the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire. 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.

What an image – before these terrifying beasts of destruction thrones are set up. The God who will set up a table for you before your enemies so that you can sit down and dine with Him amid the chaos sets his throne before these fearsome beasts with no concern.

The Ancient One, or Ancient of Days as some texts refer to him, wears clothing white as snow – he is pure, perfect - without blemish. His hair is white as wool, in case you missed the word ancient, the white hair will give a hint to the maturity and wisdom of this God.

The fiery flames of the throne refer to the purity of the one who sits upon it – fire cleanses and purifies. The fiery wheels tell us this throne is mobile – we cannot run from it, we cannot hide. And a stream of fire issues from the very presence of God.

God takes his place, court is declared in session, and the books are opened.

Into this scene comes one like a human being, coming with the clouds of heaven. Do you remember in Acts when Jesus ascended? Two angels said to the disciples ‘This Jesus will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’ Jesus arrives with the clouds and was presented to the court. 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.

Now this is the authority of Jesus. Granted directly by the Father, by the Ancient of Days. Authority to sit in judgement over the four beasts who represent four kingdoms – great earthly power - empires that must bow before the King. Indeed, all peoples, all nations and all languages should serve him. Do you think that includes the church? Should this perhaps also include you and I?

John of Patmos also had a vision of Christ the Judge; we read his vision in the book of Revelation. John describes one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force. When I saw him, John writes, I fell at his feet as though dead.

Are you beginning to get the picture yet? John collapsed when confronted with Jesus – his long robes and sash indicating authority, white hair of wisdom, piercing eyes like a flame of fire and a roaring voice like Niagara Falls.

From his mouth comes a razor sharp double edged sword; the word of God is living and active, we read in Hebrews, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

With a few words, Jesus will cut away our excuses, assumptions, and pretensions – our weak justifications and self serving reasoning will be like chaff before the fire. Do you understand that this is the day that we are praying for when we pray ‘thy kingdom come?’ This is what we are waiting for during this season of Advent; the return of our King and Judge.

Power and authority were given to Jesus by God – he possesses both right now - Jesus isn’t waiting for power. When we look at Jesus’ ministry during his first visit to earth we see that he directed storms with a word, healed with a touch, created food from nothing, raised the dead, and poured out his spirit upon all the earth. These are the actions of one with both power and authority.

How does this square up with the Jesus meek and mild image that we like to carry around with us? Does this sound like our pal Jesus, our buddy, our homie? Does this Jesus sound like someone we can just pull out when we want something and then put back on the shelf when we’re done with him? Do we really want to be treating this master as a mascot?

Now, if this message hits you as it did me, you’ll be feeling pretty desperate about now. I spent some time thinking about the ways that I have offended Christ – not really because I’m worried about punishment, that’s not the motivation – but when I seriously think of Christ as King and think of how I’ve treated him I am devastatingly convicted. I am wrong. I live wrong. I think wrong.

But, and this is the good news, the story does not end here. I am not left in despair. When John collapsed before the terrifying image of his King, Jesus put his hand on him, saying, ‘Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.’

Jesus judges, but while that two-edged sword cuts away the dross and garbage it also reveals the good and healthy growth underneath. Because Jesus has defeated death, rose again, and has placed his spirit within us, we also are able to rise with him from defeat into glory. All is not lost, indeed, it’s quite the opposite.

Tozer is right. We, as Jesus’ church and as individuals, have turned away from Christ. We do not recognize him as master over all areas of our lives. We lie to ourselves; we are flawed; we are broken. But God can work with that; God chooses to work with that.

Because we are flawed the church has always existed in a state of apostasy - like the disciples we're constantly getting it wrong – we’re constantly missing the point. Yet, despite our weaknesses we are the vehicle that God has chosen to spread the gospel message.

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, Jesus said. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

Paul writes, ‘it is through the church that the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places in accordance with the eternal purpose carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord.’

We have a job to do. We are called with a purpose. Now is not the time to wallow in self-pity and recriminations. Even though we’ve fallen down, we’ve gotten lost, and we’ve made a mess of things generally, God still chooses to work through us. God has offered to redeem us, our place is to be among the thousand thousands serving him.

We are only hypocrites when we say that we have no sin, or if we admit no fault. As long as we don't admit our fault, we will continue to stumble over it. But once we face reality, both the beauty and the disappointment, God can begin to use us again. There is hope – God has made sure of that.

There will never be a perfect church in this creation, but we *can* be an imperfect church that keeps returning to God in prayer and seeking the leading of the Spirit; a church that once again properly places Jesus as our only head and king.

Amen.