

Out of Order

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: As I mentioned earlier, today we come the end of the church year. And perhaps you recall that when we began this cycle twelve months back, I said I was going to make it a point this year to preach many of the lectionary texts that I have avoided in the past for one reason or another; some because they were so brief that there didn't seem much to say about them, others because they weren't as powerful or insightful as the other texts they were matched with, and still others (I'll admit) because I didn't fully understand them and didn't think I could do them justice. Anyway, trying to stay true to my intent, I'll end this year by preaching a text that I have avoided: today's Epistle. This one I've stayed away from for different reason. What's that? It seems to be out of order. Traditionally, it's a text appointed for Easter Sunday. And it's easy to see why: it's about the resurrection of Jesus. And I have preached this text for Easter because that's where it seems to belong. Here at the end of the year when we're focusing on Christ's return in judgment and other end time topics, it just appears to be out of order.

But upon closer examination, I discovered that being out of order is what the text is about. It's an interesting expression: "out of order". We use it in several different ways. If you want to use an ATM machine to get some cash and there's a sign on it that says "out of order", it means it's broken. It's not working properly. You're not going to get any money out of it today. In the military, there's a clearly defined chain of command. And privates don't issue commands to generals. If they tried, they'd be out of order – and so would their behavior. The women in my life have library related careers. And one thing about librarians is that they're pretty obsessive about books being shelved properly. You're not going to find what you're looking for if they've been placed somewhere in the collection out of order. In court or when conducting a meeting according to Robert's Rules, a person's comments can be ruled to be out of order if they're inappropriate or presented at the wrong time. And even here in worship, we have a liturgy that follows a logical sequence. It's not going to make any sense and we're only going to confuse people if we do things out of order.

And this, according to today's text, is the problem with all of creation: it's out of order – in every sense of the term. Recall the first two chapters of Genesis, which describe the work of God to create all things: how he does it all according to a carefully thought out plan, and how all of its intricate systems are designed to compliment and assist each other. And in this creation he establishes a clear cut chain of command: himself on top as King of the universe, and under him and over all the earth the man and woman he made in his own image, and under them all the other creatures he made. Everything was in perfect order, doing exactly what it was designed by God to do. And it was all good.

But along comes the archangel Lucifer who was not satisfied with his appointed place as the guardian and protector of our first parents in the Garden. He decided that it did not suit him to serve. He'd rather be served. He wanted to be the one issuing the orders. Thus he went after them; telling them, in effect, that they too should be dissatisfied with their appointed place in creation – that they could and should be more like God, even though they were already bearing his image. And they fell for it.

And with them fell all things under them; all things fell out of order. Instead of being drawn to God in fellowship, our first parents fled from him in fear. Instead of being united in love to each other, they fell to self justification and to accusing one another. Their once perfect harmony became a bitter struggle for power and control. Creation itself fell out of order. The animals, once friendly and cooperative, became enemies. Now they were predators and prey; the fear of man coming upon them all. Even the earth rebelled. Where once its very nature was to serve the will of man and produce fruit for his enjoyment, now it produced thorns and thistles. Its weather became a hostile force, producing floods and violent storms, and extremes of cold and heat. And over all reigned death. Whereas God had given all things life, man plunged all things under the curse of death by his stepping out of order.

So it is even today. We live in a world that's completely out of order. Nothing works precisely as it was designed by God to do. Instead we have terrorism and wars, we have famines and plagues, we have dissent and unrest – a whole world full of misery, suffering, and injustice; all things growing old, wearing out, running down, and finally failing. And no matter how hard we try, we can't fix it. Like the fabled Humpty-Dumpty, all the king's horses and all the king's men can't put it back in order again. Why? It's because we are part of what's broken. Each one of us adds our own out-of-ordered-ness to the equation. You can't wash an infected wound with a contaminated sponge and expect it to get any better. It only makes things worse. And so do each and every one of us by our sin.

What's needed, as St. Paul points out, and indeed, as he shows God has provided, is a fixer from the outside to solve the problems and reorder all things – a fixer who is at once one of us and yet who is not part of the problem; a fixer who is in and under the proper order of God. "For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits ..."

Firstfruits: that's a word we need to unpack a bit to understand what Paul is saying. It doesn't mean primarily the first part of a harvest to ripen as the translation suggests, although that idea is included. Rather, it refers to the portion of a sacrifice that was offered to God in order to consecrate the whole and to redeem and forgive those who partook of it. That is to say, if you brought a lamb to the temple to offer it as a sacrifice for your sins, only a small portion of it would actually be placed upon the burning altar: specifically, the blood (and for some sacrifices the fat around certain organs). That was it. The rest you took home for supper – and by eating it, you became a participant in and receiver of the benefits the sacrifice gained. Again, the portion that was offered to God was called the firstfruits.

So, in calling Jesus the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep, that is, who died, Paul is saying that he is the part of the sacrifice that was offered to God to consecrate the whole – all who have died. That's how he fixed the curse of death: he died for all. He paid the penalty we all deserved. He satisfied the law of God that stood against us because of our sins. And now in calling him the firstfruits of the resurrection, he's saying that just as Christ has risen from the dead, so also will everyone else when Jesus returns to reorder all things.

Paul goes on to explain the order in which this is being done. Christ is reigning now. He does this through his Church. Here he comes among us to reorder us: to remake us in God's image by allowing us to partake in the benefits of his sacrifice. By giving us his holy Word and his body and blood in the Sacrament, he is forgiving our sins, cleansing our hearts and minds, and giving us his Spirit to lead and guide us. That's how he is making us his own, members of

his own body. And that's how he is crushing the rebellious will in us that stands opposed to God and his perfect plan for order in our lives.

And so he will continue to reign in his church, Paul tells us, until comes the day when he returns to put all his enemies under his feet. Then he will bring with him those who belong to him who have fallen asleep. They will be raised in bodies immortal. Satan, his unholy angels, and all who stand against the Lord will be overthrown and cast into the Lake of Fire. And death, the last enemy, will be destroyed forever. Everything will be put back into proper order. And then Christ, who himself is subject to the will of his heavenly Father, will deliver the restored and reordered earth back under the perfect, rightful, and righteous rule of the King of all Creation. God will be all in all. And all things will again be very good indeed.

This is God's promise to us in Jesus his Son. This is our hope and joyful expectation. May we therefore hold fast to these truths and continue to abide steadfast in holy faith and the fellowship of Christ's Church, for it is here that he is even now reigning and working to fix in us all that still remains out of order. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!