



## Marking Time: On the Beginning of the Ecclesiastical New Year

Have you ever noticed the ways we mark the passage of time in our lives? Since my “day job” is in a university, I usually think in terms of semesters and academic years. Many of us may look back to “the good old days” when we remember life being better or look ahead to a time when we are done with school or able to retire. Perhaps family life was better or worse for us in the past or the economy or the world situation was more or less to our liking. One way or another, we will find a way to make sense of how our lives fit into a larger scheme of time.

Jesus Christ began His ministry by announcing that a new phase of time had begun. No, He was not talking about a new season of the year or the rule of a new emperor. Instead, the Lord proclaimed that He Himself is the fulfillment of all the hopes and dreams of the Old Testament prophets for the fullness of time, for the presence of God’s Kingdom. The word “messiah” means “anointed one,” and He is truly the One anointed to preach the good news of salvation to poor, brokenhearted, blind, and captive humanity. This Second Adam has come to set right everything set wrong by the first Adam, to usher us into a new life in which our self-inflicted spiritual wounds, and all their unhappy consequences, are healed. By restoring us to the dignity of the children of God in the divine likeness, the Lord’s salvation strikes at the heart of why people fear, oppress, abuse, and violate one another in the world as we know it. By making us participants in His life, Christ enables us to live out personally the blessedness of the Kingdom in a world still mired in the ways of slavery and death.

That is precisely why St. Paul wrote that Christians should pray for everyone, especially for those with power and authority in the world, that we may live “a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Have you noticed how we pray so often in our services for the peace of the world, the union of all people, and favorable conditions for all those created in the image and likeness of God? Because we believe that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the entire world, we want literally everyone to participate in the blessings of His Kingdom. We want literally everyone to be set free from captivity to sin and death and all their ill effects. As those who live in the new day of God’s reign, how could we want anything less?

While it is true that some become saints in situations of persecution, war, and disease, God did not intend us for suffering. He is not the author of evil, and we should not want difficult circumstances for ourselves or others. Instead, we pray for situations favorable to the flourishing of the Church and of every human being. No, good times are not the same as the fullness of the Kingdom, but every good thing is the work of God and provides at least a faint glimpse of heavenly glory for which we were created. Christ has come to heal and restore our fallen selves such that we will be able recognize our blessings for what they are and to offer them back to Him through a life of holiness. We are then able to play our proper role in fashioning the world into an icon of the Kingdom, a foretaste of heavenly peace even now. The Kingdom will not be completed through different arrangements of worldly politics and power, but by humanity united with divinity, drawn into personal union with Christ through the faithful witness of a Church whose life shines so brightly with eternal joy that the sick, poor, blind, and downtrodden will be drawn to Him like moths to a flame.

Today begins a new year in the Church and presents us all with much a needed reminder that, if we claim



to be Christians, we must live according to the new day that our Savior has brought to the world. If we are truly united personally with the Lord, then our lives must manifest good news to the poor, sight for the blind, and liberty to the captives—no matter what kinds of poverty, blindness, and captivity they experience. We must become living witnesses that something new and holy has begun upon the earth, that God's reign has truly dawned, and is good news for everyone. But if we are so pathetically weak from the ravages of sin, if we are blinded spiritually or totally enslaved by our passions, we will hardly be in a position to bear witness to others of the new life of the Kingdom. If we are not living proof that a new era has begun in which death is slain and evil is vanquished, then we will have nothing to offer the world in either word or deed. Why should anyone believe that something new has begun if we keep living according to the old standards of the corrupt world?

At this point, it is easy for us all to despair because we know that we are not yet fully healed from the ravages of sin; we know that we do not yet have perfect sight and remain shackled by our self-centered desires and addictions in many ways. Here we must be brutally honest that God's Kingdom has yet to come in its fullness in our own lives. That is not His fault, of course, but ours. And no matter how faithful we may be, we still await the great mystery of our Lord's second coming, of His glorious return to judge the living and the dead and to establish the life of the world to come. The question, however, is how we await that great future fulfillment as people who have much room to grow in holiness. In other words, what kind of life is appropriate for those who know that our only hope is the mercy of the Lord?

Well, it is certainly not a life characterized by despair. It is certainly not a life of abandoning the way of discipleship because we stumble and fall. It is certainly not a life so filled with pride that we refuse to persevere along a path where we are in constant need of the Savior's healing and help. No, we have not yet arrived; but our only hope of growing in union with Christ is to follow Him as best we can, gratefully accepting whatever glimpses of the new life of the Kingdom we have the spiritual strength to see. In Him, a bright new day has begun and all God's promises have been fulfilled. He is infinitely holy, but we all have a long way to go.

So let us all use the new church year as a time to receive as fully as we can the good news He has proclaimed, to participate as much as we can in the freedom from sin that He has brought to humanity, and to open the eyes of our souls as fully as possible to the One Who brings sight to the blind. And as we do so, let us show His mercy to others, treating them with love, forgiveness, and generosity in ways that demonstrate that something new really has begun in Jesus Christ, Who wants all to be saved, to come to the knowledge of the truth, and to share in the great blessings of His Kingdom.