

The Wide Arch of the Ranged Empire Ephesians 1:15-23

Rev. Jenaba Waggy
November 26, 2023

One of the things I truly like about Thanksgiving dinners is the ways in which the conversations, every year, are wildly unpredictable. This can be unpredictable in an awful way, unfortunately, but when it's good it can be hilarious; I have had Thanksgivings in my life where I was asked about my favorite element on the periodic table (I don't have one, but my uncle does), told where the best era for time travelling was (that person said early 18th century, with which I vehemently disagree), and listened—multiple times—to explanations of the history and culture of baseball. (I still think it's a dull game.) This year, I found myself in a challenge over the best of William Shakespeare's tragedies (it's *King Lear*, of course).

Yet there were some who argued for a lesser-known tragedy, *Antony and Cleopatra*. That play is a wildly romanticized imagining of the end of the Roman triumvirate centered around the doomed relationship of the title characters as Marc Antony focuses too much on his infatuation with the queen of Egypt and gets outfoxed by Octavius Caesar. It certainly isn't my favorite, especially after spending years studying actual Roman history, but it does have the intensity of Shakespeare's language that yields some marvelous quotes.

In the very first scene of the play, Antony and Cleopatra are together at her palace when a messenger arrives from Rome. Cleopatra urges Antony to pay attention and hear whether Caesar has something important to say, but he is already too wrapped up in her. "Call in the messengers," she tells him, and Antony responds dismissively, "Let Rome in Tiber melt and the wide arch / Of the ranged empire fall. Here is my space. / Kingdoms are clay."¹

It's a bold statement, and ultimately one that leads to his death, to declare that the entire might of the Roman Empire can go stuff itself in the face of his desire to be with his love. It's also quite the declaration of where Antony's notion of power lies and whether Caesar truly has the command over his co-ruler that he thinks he does.

A similar subversive dismissiveness rings through the verses of today's reading. The letter to the Ephesians is an odd duck in the Biblical canon because we can't quite pin it down to a time period; Margaret MacDonald of St. Francis Xavier University writes that "many commentators now argue that the work had more than one purpose...some argue that it more closely resembles a liturgical piece [or] a sermon...in light of the challenges of the latter decades of the first century CE when the death of the apostles and growing diversity of church teachings...required new emphasis on the identity of the church". We're not even quite sure of the author. "In modern scholarship, the majority view...is that the work was written in Paul's name by a close associate."² Although addressed to the community at Ephesus, it's possible that this was a circular letter meant for several fledgling kinships in the clunky and young Church—

¹ Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, act I, scene 1, ll. 38–40 ([Antony and Cleopatra - Act 1, scene 1 | Folger Shakespeare Library](#))

² MacDonald, "Ephesians," in *The New Interpreter's Bible One Volume Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 833.

which makes it all the more remarkable that it is so adamant about who has what power and authority.

“I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus...and I do not cease to give thanks for you,” begins this passage, a foundation of gratitude that is entirely apt in the season of Thanksgiving and a traditional way to begin a letter of the time.³ Professor C. Clifton Black of Princeton Theological Seminary writes, “[Ephesians] in its entirety — is an uninterrupted thanksgiving...Thanks are extended, not to the letter’s recipients, but to God for stimulating the church’s faith, love, insight, and hope (verses 16-19).”⁴

The writer here gives thanks for a God Who gives, among everything else, a “spirit of wisdom and revelation” so the Ephesians can “perceive what is the hope to which He has called you.” What hope? Not only to *let* the empire’s arches fall but to be reassured that they *will*, that Rome with its divisions and injustices will drown, that kingdoms are clay, that Christ is left standing after everything else fails, “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come”.

There are a lot of things going on this particular Sunday: it is the liturgical holiday recognizing Christ the King, an interesting event in a church that is often discomfited by the language of royalty. It is the Sunday after the American holiday of Thanksgiving, a day of connection and gratitude with horrifically whitewashed origins as well as civic questions about the ongoing impact of food insecurity in cities both near and far. It is the tail end of Native American Heritage Month, a federal recognition since 1990 of the importance of the indigenous peoples in these United States and yet a marked ongoing lack of accountability for preservation and honor as those same people are threatened with loss of land, new pipelines, and ongoing culture erasure. It is the Sunday before Advent begins, a strange and beautiful beginning of the Christian year where Christ is King *and* an unexpected and powerless infant and neither identity cancels out the other.

Rather a lot more to ponder than the U of M/OSU game.

I’m aware that many here don’t roll with the language of kingdoms, and that’s valid. It’s hard, especially for Americans with our ongoing legacy of imperialism in the name of democracy, to name kings as anything we would want to have, let alone worship. But this disciple of Paul’s veneration of Christ, his prayer of hope, is not because he needed to trade one emperor for another. Paul and his early followers knew well how empires could crush and imprison. But it was precisely that awareness of the fallibility of human lords that spurred the celebration of a divine One; Christ not only is *more* emperor than Caesar but completely *remakes* the entire concept. Professor Mark Tranvik of Luther Seminary writes, “[W]hen Paul stresses in Ephesians that not only is Christ seated at the right hand of God (Ephesians 1:20) but then goes on to remark that he is ‘far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named’ (Ephesians 1:21), he is saying something about the relative power of governments and rulers. While they certainly are to be respected (see Romans 13:1-7), they are not be equated in any way with the dominion of Christ himself.”⁵

³ See MacDonald on the nod to Hellenistic letters thanking the gods for the recipient’s health, “Ephesians,” 835.

⁴ [Commentary on Ephesians 1:15-23 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2011

⁵ [Commentary on Ephesians 1:11-23 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2013

This is not a king who taxes, traps, and tires his citizens; this is not an emperor who hoards land and resources while civilians starve; this is not a lord who sacrifices people for power. This is a God Who is embodied in a brown, Jewish child, the son of a carpenter; this is a God Who teaches that the last shall be first and that injustice is the highest crime; this is a God Who allowed greed and fear to crucify Him only to defeat death and return to charge the Church with a message of ferocious compassion that refuses to ignore the lost, the least, and the cast-aside.

No wonder the letter speaks of this as hope! No wonder there is thanksgiving for the ways in which the letter's recipients have been brought into the tale of grace, of love, of life abundant! Professor Black continues, "If the church's witness is true, if in fact God has made *Christ* the King, then no other power on this earth is sovereign and deserves ultimate obedience...Before Christ the King, all our idols collapse beneath his feet as rubble before the One who has subjected all things to his Messiah (verse 22)...This letter does not deny deep human divisions...[but the faith] is that none of these things can or will defeat God, shackle his Christ, or enslave his church. Christ Jesus occupies the heavenly throne *now*."

"...If Christ is King, then Christians are not helpless victims. They are conduits of Christ's immeasurably redemptive power (verse 19): the church is the very body of his fullness that fills all things with loving goodness (verses 22b-23; also 2:8, 10, 19-22; 3:10, 17-19)."⁶

"Let Rome in Tiber melt," says Antony who only has eyes for his girlfriend, but this Church is Christ's body, "the fullness of him who fills all in all," writes Paul with a heart full of hope. This is not a declaration of war against empire but a satisfied observation that it's already been won; this is not an invitation to take power for ourselves and inevitably break the beloved humans who fall to us but an encouragement to celebrate that Christ's rule is full of healing, dignity, and restoration. No authority, no power, no dominion can overtake the God Who reaches out a hand to everyone and says, "Come, beloved creation, and be made whole in the justice and mercy I wield."

How hope-filled are we, Church, that Christ is the kind of King who fills us with goodness so that we might become love to the world? How do we come back from Thanksgiving grateful for all our blessings but aware that there is so much work to be done toward a just and merciful world? How do we prepare for the waiting season of Advent to honor a God-made-human in such a way that we, too, learn to love our own humanity and respect that of others in all our complex, beautiful, infuriating diversity? How do we look at our own power structures and idols and say to them *kingdoms are clay* but that we do not cease to give thanks for those who remind us of faith, hope, and love?

It is in education; learn who holds power and how they are using it, and fight for the voiceless to be heard. It is management; keep an eye on where you yourself are building wide arches of your own empire and ignoring the ways in which Christ beckons you to serve in an entirely different kind of kingdom. It is encouragement; to come together in thanksgiving and praise, we who are called the Church, to recognize the gift of being able to shore each other up in the long work of justice and mercy. And it is faith; every day, it is a recommitment to the idea

⁶ [Commentary on Ephesians 1:15-23 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2011

that there is hope in this God Who fills all in all, Who loves beyond death into life, Who holds power not to crush but to lift up. May we have such faith, now and forever. Amen.