# The Fullness of Christ and the Rule of Paul

This is the last Sunday of the church year; next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent. A relatively recent tradition declares today the Sunday of “Christo Rey,” or “Christ the King” Sunday, in which we celebrate the victory and power of Jesus, who was defeated and became powerless for our sake. It is also the last Sunday in which we will take up the themes from John Howard Yoder’s book, *Body Politics*, that is, the themes of binding and loosing, of communion and baptism, and today of the fullness of Christ and the Rule of Paul. There is so much to say, and we have so little time; we can only begin to look at these themes. I only say this because whatever we say today cannot be the last word on these topics, but only the first ones.

Because it is Christ the King Sunday, it is only appropriate that we look at a passage from Scripture that examines our themes from a kingly perspective; even better, our passage uses the expression “the fullness of Christ,” and so we might get an understanding of this cryptic phrase. So, lets look at the letter to the Ephesians 4:1-16:

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

7 But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift. 8 Therefore it is said,

“When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive;

he gave gifts to his people.”

9 (When it says, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? 10 He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) 11 The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. 14 We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. 15 But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love. [[1]](#footnote-1)

We have in this passage the beautiful image of Christ our King who has “ascended on high,” taking “captivity captive.” And what could this mean, but that Christ kills Death, destroys destruction, binds bondage, enslaves slavery? No longer are we the objects of oppression, for Christ has oppressed oppression itself. In other words, we are given life, we are loosed to freedom, we share in the victory that Christ the Victor achieved.

We see the grand parade that King Jesus leads. As a victorious King, he leads his prisoners so all can see his victory. Who do we count among the “host of captives”? Help me name them: Death, Destruction, Sin, Hell, Injustice, Hunger, Want …

And we are reminded that Christ’s victory does not come from a massive army waging a War to End All Wars. Instead, his ascending implies his descending. As we enter into Advent, we will be reminded again and again that this majestic Christ as the baby Jesus, the apparently unknown and illegitimate son of unknown parents. Even as we tell the story of how kings come to bring this baby homage, we’ll remember that one of the gifts they bring is frankincense, used for burial. Even as we see the angels in the sky declaring “Peace on Earth,” we’ll remember that it’s the poorest of the poor shepherds who attend him.

So see the King Jesus, ascending, leading a host of captives. We are in crowd, watching. And this is like the best Mardi Gras parade ever. For King Jesus in his generosity does not toss trinkets and beads. Indeed, King Jesus “gives gifts to his people.” But the gifts are far, far better. Of course, even being called “his people” is a gift. “since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; 24 [we] are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Seeing the captives is a gift. But there is even more. King Jesus tosses gifts to the crowd. One person reaches out, catches it—it’s the gift of apostleship. Another person reaches out, and catches the gift of prophecy. Another catches the gift of evangelism, of teaching, of pastoral care, of care for children, of prayer, of a deeply abiding desire for justice, of hospitality, of inclusion, of prayer, of administration … Boom, boom, boom, the generous King tosses out the gifts.

But it’s not random—Paul reminds us elsewhere that every single person in the body of Christ; every single person in this crowd receives at least one gift. And this passage reminds us that the gifts have a purpose and goal. And that goal is not at all about our own self-fulfillment. It is about the “fullness of Christ.” This is a picture, and in context, it’s not that difficult to understand. “We must grow up in every way,” the passage says: as the Body of Christ, we, together, are to grow into what we are meant to be, with Christ as our leader, source and director. It’s not self-fulfillment. It’s sort of us-fulfillment: to be the church we are meant to be; but the imagery here is even more striking: it’s Christ-fulfillment. We are to become that which Jesus came to make us; we fulfill his goal as we are “built up together in love:” we are all united in the goal to grow into the Body we need to be. We are diverse in the gifts we have been given.

What we do together here on Sunday morning is part of that, and “the rule of Paul” of which Yoder speaks is just to recognize that our unity and diversity is on display every time we meet together for worship. One prays, one teaches, one blesses, one prepares the meal; we sing together, we raise our joys and concerns together, we react to the scripture together. We have different teaching styles, different songs we like to sing, different attention spans and histories. We are in the same space (if sometimes that space gets extended a bit virtually) at the same time. We act together now, each doing our different part, in unity and in diversity, and so we step-by-step, and week-by-week promote the body’s growth.

Last week’s teaching by Aaron on the talents reminds us that it’s not just on Sunday morning that we work together in unity and diversity to grow into the fullness of Christ. I am so pleased to have Aaron’s take and Aaron’s task—to grow some seed money of $100 into a bigger amount, which can be used for God’s purposes—is both a parable of how we grow together *and* a means for us to grow together. Let’s take it seriously.

I said when I taught on the chapter about “binding and loosing,” that I would have more to say about this at some time. I don’t think I understand, yet, much of what this means, so I can’t speak beyond what I know. Yet I notice in this passage some echoes of binding: we are “joined and knit together” just as the parts of the human body are joined and knit together. We are called to unity “in the bond of peace.” We are connected, even in our diversity, to a joint effort—not loosely being tossed to and fro ‘by the world’s doctrine,’ but following the one God. We are bound to love.

And I see a kind of loosing here too, particularly in our King letting loose with his gifts, providing them to everyone, rich and poor, smart and dumb, cool and lame; on women and on men; on people of all backgrounds. Christ has measured out his gifts to his people, and, by strong implication, we should loose one another to exercise those gifts; why would we bind that which Christ has freely given?

So, let me conclude with the final admonition from our passage this morning, which reminds us of our duty and the honor of being part of Christ’s body:

We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.

1. *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Eph 4:1–16). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ro 3:23–24). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)