

## **Sermon: The Alpha and the Omega**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Nov. 24, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I am deeply troubled by what's happening in Lebanon. An Israeli airstrike in early Saturday morning has flattened out a six-story building in a densely populated residential neighbourhood in central Beirut, killing 15 people and wounding 63, according to Lebanon's Health Ministry. This was the fourth strikes in that area in less than a week, as diplomats scrambled to broker a ceasefire between Israel, Lebanon and the Hazbollah. Ever since intense fighting started months ago, in the southern border of Lebanon, between the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and the paramilitary wing of the Hazbollah, more than 3,500 people have been killed, and 1.2 million displaced, or a quarter of Lebanon's population.

The country, already reeling from the Lebanese liquidity crisis in 2019, the explosion at the port of Beirut in 2020, the subsequent collapse of its currency, widespread resource shortages, political instability, high unemployment and rampant poverty. Even before this latest incursion by the IDF, the World Bank has already defined Lebanon's economic crisis as one of the world's worst since the 19th century.

It really is a sad state of affairs, for a country with a glorious past—its capital city Beirut was known in the ancient time as Tyre, its maritime commerce once supported the building of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, Jesus had travelled a number of times, the apostles had visited and evangelized.

Lebanon is a country where Muslims, Christians, and Jews have co-existed, not necessarily peaceful all the time, but nevertheless co-existed, acknowledged and accepted one another. I've always thought of the country as a barometer of the state of affairs, between the three major religions of the world, the so-called three Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. But the temperature currently is uncomfortably hot, with the ever so elusive peace hanging in the balance.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, today is the last Sunday in the Christian calendar, a day that was formerly called 'Christ the King' Sunday, and has now been recast as the 'Reign of Christ'. It is a day on which the

faithfuls gather and look hopefully towards the coming Kingdom of God that is marked by peace, justice, and reconciliation.

All the Lectionary passages today point to that kingship of Christ. The passage in 2 Samuel 23 contains the last words of David, praising God for making an everlasting covenant with his house, that a descendant of David will always sit on the throne. The passage in Daniel 7 describes the coming Son of Man, before the throne of God, who was “given dominion and glory and kingship that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.” (7:14) And of course Revelation 1, where Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, is coming with the clouds, and the Lord God seated on the throne, proclaiming,

**“I am the Alpha and the Omega”**, says the Lord God who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

Nevertheless, an uncomfortable question must be asked: If Christ Jesus is the Messiah, the King, then where is the Shalom? The recent conflict in the Middle East may not directly involved the Christians, but one cannot easily forget or pepper over the ugly history of anti-Semitism within the Church. The crusades during medieval periods, the Holocaust during WWII all highlight the need for the Church to discern the continual illumination and correction of the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures. Extremists within any tradition do exist, but the core of faiths must be built on a common starting point and a common understanding that Christians, Jews and Muslim of the three Abrahamic faiths, all worship the same God, and have the same hope for peace.

**I am the Alpha and the Omega**, says the Lord God.

What then does it mean to proclaim that Christ is King? That was Pilate’s question before he authorized the crucifixion of Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus hesitated, he was less than clear with this rebuttal, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” Jesus did later explain that his kingdom does not belong to this world, and is not from here. He further explained that it is precisely for this reason that he came into the world to testify to the truth. To that statement, the Roman Governor retorted in verse 38, “What is truth?” What is truth?

**I am the Alpha and the Omega**, says the Lord God.

Christ the King Sunday was not always celebrated by the Church. In fact, it was originally established in 1925, by the then Pope Pius XI, to counter what he called the 'loss of faith'—such as seen in the rising tides of secularity and disillusionment. It was instituted to also counter the 'rise of bad faith'—such as seen in materiality, violence, earthly systems and human power. To quote what Pope Pius XI said in 1925, "The peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ," is a kingdom that "demands of its subjects a spirit of detachment from riches and earthly things, and a spirit of gentleness. They must hunger and thirst after justice, and more than this, they must deny themselves and carry the cross."

**I am the Alpha and the Omega**, says the Lord God.

The icon of Christ Pantokrator is one of the most widely used religious images of Orthodox Christianity. Often seen in the central dome of a Byzantine church—Christ is seated in glory, surrounded by angels and the elect, with left hand holding the Book of Life, and the right hand displaying a gesture of blessing.

The word 'Pantocrator' in Greek, often translated as 'Almighty', is one of many names applied to God. It is a compound word formed from the Greek for "all" and the verb meaning "to accomplish something" or "to sustain something". The Hebrew equivalent of this word is El Shaddai, or the Lord of Hosts.

In the Book of Revelation, this word Pantokrator is used nine times, depicting God and Christ interchangeably. The meaning is clear, that God in Christ is all-powerful, the ruler of all, the sustainer of world. God is not seen as having potential to do something, God in Christ in fact does everything. As the author of John testifies about Christ in his opening chapter, "*All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being, in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*" (v.3-4)

**I am the Alpha and the Omega**, says the Lord God.

On the cover page of this Sunday's bulletin is an image taken from the Sarcophagus of Drausin, preserved by the Louvre in Paris, France. It is

an image with the two Greek letters of 'Alpha' and 'Omega', with the monogram of Christ standing at the centre. Surrounding it are depiction of grapes, vines and branches—furthering the message of life in Christ. Fittingly, this stone burial container is making a strong theological statement of life, beginning with faith in Christ and ending with eternal life through him.

**I am the Alpha and the Omega**, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

So, on this Sunday of Christ the King, we look forward not to king of a people, but the king for all people. We exalt not a kingdom of this world, but the kingdom not from here. We celebrate the Kingdom of God that has come to us, but not fully yet, and remember the peace that is promised, but hasn't yet come to its full fruition. We live in a time of despair, but are sustained by hope—a living hope in the Triune God who is the Alpha and the Omega, the author and the finisher of our faith. While we await this coming Kingdom of God, we gather to worship and pray, to serve and proclaim that Jesus Christ lives. Christ lives in St. Giles, this beautifully restored sanctuary. Christ lives in our hearts, in our speeches, in our songs, and in our works. To God be the glory, forever, and ever.

**I am the Alpha and the Omega**, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

Allow me to finish my reflection, once again with words of Pope Pius XI, spoken in 1925, "If to Christ our Lord is given all power in heaven and on earth; if all men, purchased by his precious blood.....He must reign in our minds, which should assent with perfect submission.....He must reign in our wills, which should obey the laws and precepts of God. He must reign in our hearts, which should spurn natural desires and love God above all things, and cleave to him alone. He must reign in our bodies and in our members, which should serve as instruments for the interior sanctification of our souls...as instruments of justice unto God."

Let this be so.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**