

November 22, 200
Feast of Christ the King
Ez 34:11-12, 15-17
1 Cor 15:20-26, 28
Mt 25:31-46

About 15 years ago when my youngest son was an undergraduate student at MIT I found myself in Boston on a business trip, so I phoned him and offered to take him and a few of his friends to dinner. When I arrived to pick them up I found two of the boys playing chess---backwards. I asked them what they were doing.

"We're playing chess backwards."

"Why", I asked.

"Because playing the regular way is far too easy."

I quickly realized why MIT is MIT and that I would be bringing the average IQ of our little dinner party way down. My experience with these MIT geniuses that night is a six beer story, so I'll save the details for another time. Let's just say that we came from different worlds, real or imagined.

Lately I've been thinking about those two backward chess guys, wondering if perhaps they're weathering this pandemic better than most of us. After all, everything in our lives is backwards right now.

Who ever thought we'd be consuming more alcohol with our hands than with our mouths? Backwards chess.

I never thought I could enter a bank with a mask on and not get arrested. Now you get arrested if you're not wearing a mask. Backwards chess.

Our whole lives we've been conditioned to get up in the morning and go to school or work. Now we're told to get up in the morning and stay home. Backwards chess.

We're a social people. Throughout human history we've gathered into communities. Prisons have used solitary confinement as a form of punishment. Now we're told to isolate ourselves from others for the common good. Backwards chess.

We're explorers by nature. Think Marco Polo, Christopher Columbus, and Neil Armstrong. NASA scientists and engineers are planning how to travel safely to and from Mars. Yet now we're told not to travel, that it's selfish and rude to travel. We're told that those who promote travel are putting profits over people. After all, no one wants to be the person who brings the virus into another community or brings it back home from another community. We're told that if we want to take a vacation, take a STAYcation—in our own backyards. Backwards chess. It seems that this pandemic is forcing us to do the opposite of all that comes naturally to us. Backwards chess.

Today we celebrate Our Lord Jesus Christ as King of the Universe. Let's think about the enormity of that for a moment.

Scientists tell us that God's creation sprang into being about 13.8 billion years ago with the Big Bang that created the universe, a universe that continues to expand such that God's creation is still a construction in progress. God's creation, His universe, is estimated to contain 2 trillion galaxies, each containing about a hundred billion stars, each star with its own solar system of planets.

Here on our little spec in the universe called Planet Earth we see the beauty of God's creation continue to unfold up close and personal, most profoundly and beautifully in the conception and birth of our children. But everything we see unfolding around us is also part of God's creative plan.

As we contemplate Jesus as King of our Universe, we know that He is a servant King: "I came not to be served, but to serve". We also know that Jesus' incarnation was the most profound expression of God's creative plan in the history of humanity, an expression of perfect love.

So in the midst of the beauty of God's Creation, and with Jesus as our Servant King, how could God's creative plan include something like the coronavirus? What could possibly be accomplished through such fear, tragedy, loss, and unnatural ways of living that would further God's loving creative plan? Such questions have been on my mind these last months, as I'm sure they've been on your minds.

Of course I've got no answers for you, but I can share some thoughts and musings and wonderings that may help wrestle with these and other questions.

First, I think it's worthwhile to look back upon these past several months to search for joyful experiences in our lives that may not have otherwise happened were it not for the pandemic. I discovered some simple joys in the newly quiet world: Board games with neighbors; having our island home all to ourselves without tourists, watching coral and other marine species spring back to life in the absence of too many humans, country roads once again open to bicyclists and playing children; discovering new technologies to stay connected with friends and family; plowing through the pile of "always wanted the time to read" books; learning to embrace the quiet. Such experiences add dimensions to our lives, dimensions perhaps missing in the hustle and bustle of the pre-covid world. I think we need to trust that this is all part of God's creative plan, our servant King of the Universe continuing to serve us.

And now maybe it's time to look a little bit forward. We will soon enter the Advent season when we anticipate the celebration of God's seminal creative act, the Incarnation. Perhaps this Christmas will not be as merry as past Christmases, but maybe it can be more joyful—more joyful because it will likely be quieter, simpler, less material, less stressful—perhaps more like the first Christmas than our lived 20th and 21st century Christmas experiences. Maybe that kind joy is part of God's creative plan for us, a joy that can nourish our spiritual growth.

Looking farther forward, are there things to be learned from this pandemic that will help us become better contributors to God's creative plan, better creative partners with God? For example, using the lessons we learn from self-sacrifice, can we build stronger, less divided communities going forward? Can we embrace the concept of promoting the common good over individual rights? Can we learn to listen, even to divergent points of view, and replace shouting and tweeting with respectful debate and dialogue? Can we cancel the cancel culture? Can we help our planet to heal, physically and spiritually?

Science is part of God's creation; a tool He uses as He continues to unfold His creative plan. Can we learn to respect and trust science by following the science rather than our human cravings to satisfy our own selfish indulgences? As this pandemic spikes ever higher, if we're unwilling to stay home to protect ourselves, are we willing to stay home to protect others? Looking farther ahead, if we're unwilling to take a vaccine to protect ourselves, can we take it to protect someone else?

Speaking of a vaccine, I heard a profound statement on TV the other day during an interview with Albert Bourla, CEO of Pfizer, one of the companies developing a coronavirus vaccine. Dr Bourla said that this pandemic has accelerated the sciences of epidemiology, disease prevention, and disease treatment by a couple hundred years. To me, that sounds like our loving Creator at work.

Even though we may be experiencing a dark time right now, if we can but trust God to continue to work His Creation with the love that He has always shown us, we will find hope and joy and peace. And we will come out of this on the other side, hopefully having discovered new dimensions to our faith, a closer personal relationship with God, and a greater appreciation of community and our individual obligations toward our community. Perhaps this is also part of God's creative plan.

May Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, increase our trust in God's creative actions so that we can live joyful, not fearful, lives---lives of faith and hope and love. May we learn to be sheep, not goats. As we ultimately emerge from this pandemic, may we become a less divided and more unified society, being men and women with and for others. From one of those "always wanted to read" books, may God bless us everyone.