

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
Sunday, November 25 2018 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings: John 1:1-14
Revelation 1:4-8**

Sermon: Alpha and Omega (Reign of Christ)

Last summer, I was part of a very large group of United Church ministers who wrote a letter to Premier Doug Ford, to express some “church” priorities that we would like his government to consider. Some of my colleagues even made it into a video, and I want to share it with you now – it takes almost 5 minutes.

So just off the top I’ll answer a few questions that are usually asked about this letter:

Have we done this before, or only for Doug Ford?

This is the First Time a letter like this has been produced, but I like to think it will not be the last. The reason it was the first was because the technology we used to start the conversation – basically a UCC ministers facebook group, that technology was not being widely used by ministers in 2013 when the former Liberal premier was elected. And without the technology it would not have happened.

Is it partisan – are we as UCC ministers now somehow aligned with the opposition?

It is not meant to be a partisan response to the election, though obviously it is political in nature. It was aimed at this premier, in part, because he attended a campaign rally in the spring, at a church, where he said: *“And we will make sure—I can guarantee you we’ll make sure—the church has a voice. All the time.”*

So basically we decided to go to him, because he hadn’t come to us... yet. We aren’t exactly waiting by the phone.

Why would the premier even care?

At one time, so we are told, the United Church Moderator (our national leader) had the political clout to pick up the phone and talk to any Canadian politician they wanted. In theory, our leaders once had the authority to influence a couple of million voters. Obviously things have changed. (Though our current moderator DID have a face to face meeting with the PM a few weeks ago.) These days church leaders do not have the same status in the wider community. And we do not choose to use our authority in the same way - for example, to tell people how to vote.

As I look at that video and I see my ministry colleagues, many of them are proudly wearing the signs of their office, the clergy collar or liturgical stoles and gowns. They do that for the instant recognition that they are ministers, leaders and authorities in the church, like putting Reverend in front of your name when you are signing a letter. The church may not have a lot of political capital, but there is at least some special status credited to ministers.

There have been a variety of reactions to the letter: Were ministers right to use their status in the community in this way? Was it a good use of power, or an abuse of power? Were they right to claim the power of their position in order to promote “good Christian values”, like care for the vulnerable, social justice and reconciliation with indigenous peoples.

It raises the question: What is the rightful use of power in leadership, whether it be in politics or in church?

According to the church calendar, today is the last Sunday of the year. We always end on a high note – with Reign of Christ Sunday, a celebration of God’s power as Creator and Christ’s power, born of his resurrection.

This is a liturgical tradition that was started by Pope Pius the eleventh, shortly after the First World War. The Pope wanted to reaffirm that God – not earthly emperors or politicians – it was God who was the ultimate ruler of the world, with Christ as its king.

Since today is the last Sunday of one church year, and next Sunday is the beginning of a new one, the book of Revelation reminds us that God is the beginning and the end of all things. It uses the imagery of the Alpha and Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet to make its point. God is not just our Creator, the one who sets all life in motion. Revelation proclaims that God is also there to receive us when life ends. God even meets us when time itself has come to an end.

Over the years, the vision contained in Revelation has been the source of many fire and brimstone sermons. It has sparked the kind of fears that give children nightmares. It has also been inspiration for great works of religious art, and provides hard data for those who want to predict the end of the world.

Revelation is written in an apocalyptic style, designed for times of political repression, The text was written as if it was speaking about the future but, to its readers, it actually said more about their present rulers.

The letter comes to us full of both holy and unholy symbols: It paints a stark picture of the difference between those who use their power to care for God’s children, and those who tyrannize the world for their own gain. We should never forget that the book of the Revelation was written first of all as a pastoral letter. It may not sound very pastoral to us, who think of pastoral care in terms of prayer shawls and a caring presence.

But this was a letter written for a particular audience, to guide them through their experience of persecution and martyrdom and grief. The readers were inspired by the passionate, dramatic images – because it reflected the reality of their own suffering and great pain. Always answering that pain and suffering was the vision of Christ – God’s representative - ultimately in control, ultimately saving their lives.

One of my reasons for being part of the letter to the premier was not only to send the government a message, but to send our neighbours a message too. I hope that our most vulnerable neighbours get a chance to see the video or read the letter. I hope

they know that someone has their back. While clergy collars and stoles might not represent a lot of power these days, I hope they know they are not forgotten.

Because ultimately God hasn't forgotten. Ultimately the most vulnerable are in God's hands, and we who claim to be God's people must stand with them. From beginning to end, we do belong to the one whose intention it is to bring justice, peace and new life to all the world. Amen.