

Populus Zion, the Second Sunday of Advent
December 7, 2008

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

✧ Jesu juva ✧

WHY ALL THE FUSS?

Malachi 4:1-6; Romans 15:4-13; Luke 21:25-36

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

While it is certainly found in the other lessons of the season, in the Gospel lessons for Advent it is a bit surprising to see that there is not much about preparing for the birth of Christ. The Church has always held that there should be three-fold focus to the Advent season, one focus being Christ's coming at Christmas, the second His coming to us now through His Gospel, and the third His coming at the end times. And yet when one looks at these Gospel readings, one finds that there is quite a bit to prepare us for His ministry and Passion, and then today's lesson which speaks about Christ's second coming to judge the world. Add to these Advent Sundays the last three Sundays of the previous Church Year and you have four weeks devoted to the End Times and Christ's glorious return.

And one might think "why all this fuss over the End Times? Why not spend more time in preparation for the Christmas message and celebration? While we can speak about preparing ourselves for the incarnation of Christ at Christmas (and we certainly should give due regard to our Lord's incarnation, one of the most wondrous events that has ever happened in the history of the world), it is an event that has already happened. We can remember it, meditate upon it, and celebrate it; and we do prepare to do those things through repentance and faith; but the event itself has already happened.

Do we prepare for Christ's advent among us now? Yes, of course we do, and do so not just in a commemorative fashion, but in reality. But we who are Christians have also received this advent. Christ has come to us through His Gospel; He continues to do so; and He will do so in the future. This advent of our Lord is part and parcel of our daily lives.

The advent of Christ on the day of His return, however, is something that has not happened yet. It is still a part of the future, the day of which is unknown to us. And yet it is a day for which we must be prepared. And this preparation, though we hear about it only four times a year, is no less important than the daily preparation we make to receive our Lord now. Jesus tells us today: "But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man." This is pretty serious stuff. Christ Jesus is coming again and we must be found worthy to escape His wrath and to stand in the face of His judgment.

And yet for the one who is prepared, the Day of the Lord's coming, is a day of rejoicing and of salvation. It's a day Christians should look forward to with hope. And it's a day for which we pray. Look at the way Jesus speaks about it. While it comes as a terror to unbelievers, to Christians it is a day of promise. Concerning the signs of the end He says: "Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near..." "So you also when you see

these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near.” Your redemption draws near. The Kingdom of God is near. These are not things of which to be afraid, but things to look forward to! Yes, this day for which we pray is a day in which all that has been promised to us will be delivered in full. And so we said today in the Introit: “Restore us, O God. Cause Your face to shine and we shall be saved.”

This Last Day is also a day when the faithful will be confirmed in their faith. By that I mean their state of being, of salvation, will be made permanent. All those who are found with faith on that great day will be gathered to Christ and will never be parted from Him again. They will forevermore be without sin, dwelling with God in perfect righteousness and joy.

But those who are found on that day without faith, who have either never believed on Christ Jesus, or who once looked to Him with faith, but for one reason or another fell away into unbelief, will be confirmed in their unbelief. They will have no more time to repent. There will be no more opportunities to hear the Gospel and come to faith. Christ’s coming will have shown them the truth at last, but it will be a truth that now condemns them.

And so both the faithful and the unbelieving are exhorted by the Scriptures to repent of their sins and unbelief and to put their trust in the grace of Christ. And we must hear this exhortation continually, for the forces arrayed against us are quite strong. The devil seeks our demise, the world wants to lure us away from Christ, and our flesh lusts for the things that lead to its destruction. And so often these enemies attack by stealth through the ordinary circumstances of life, lulling the faithful so that the urgency of faith is dulled and eventually forgotten. Think about it. Apart from these few weeks at the end of the Church Year and during Advent, how often do you think about the Last Day and Christ’s return? And so Jesus warns: “take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly.”

So we must listen to the call of the Scriptures to prepare ourselves constantly and take that call seriously. This is why, after all, God has given us His holy Word, that we may both know the truth of Christ’s salvation and of His coming judgment, and by that Word be given the one and be prepared for the other. And so St. Paul tells us: “whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope...”

And to whom do the Scriptures point us? To Christ. They point us to consider again His first Advent among us when He took on our flesh that we might be rescued from all that our flesh has deserved. And they point us to His advent among us now, as He comes to us through His Holy Gospel to bestow His grace and to instill and strengthen faith in our hearts. It is almost ironic that to prepare for Christ’s advent in the future we must receive His advent now and trust in His advent long ago. But that is the beauty of faith, it always looks to Jesus. And that is the only way to be prepared against the last day, by the grace of Christ Jesus. No amount of good deeds, no amount of religious devotion, no amount of watching the signs can make you ready, unless these are done with faith through the grace of Christ. So I call on you now again to prepare for Christ’s coming, by receiving his coming now with faith, to whom belongs all honor and glory now and forever. Amen.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧