

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent, December 3, 2006

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The obvious question about today's lessons is: Why is the Palm Sunday story read on the First Sunday in Advent? The answer is that it describes the coming of Jesus to Jerusalem. "Behold, thy king cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass"—and Advent is about the coming of Jesus. The word Advent means 'coming.'

In Advent, we read the triumphal entry not historically, as on Palm Sunday, but thematically. The theme of the triumphal entry is that Jesus comes to Jerusalem in "great humility" as savior. The Advent collect contrasts this with his second coming, "when he shall come again in glorious majesty to judge."

We live in the time between the two Advents of Jesus. The Advent message is that we must repent; we must accept the salvation Jesus offered at his first coming so that we will be ready to meet him when he appears again to judge the world.

The danger is that we might live forgetful and unchanged lives. The danger is that we might live as though Christ had not died for our sins, rose from the dead and given us the gift of the Holy Spirit. The danger is that we might be like the foolish virgins of the parable whose lamps were not burning; or like the servant whose master was delayed in his return and began to neglect his duties.

Now, people often misunderstand the Advent message because they think it has something to do with knowing when and how the end of the world will come. Thus, popular books are written that detail a scenario of "end time" events. The idea seems to be that if we know what is going to happen, we can be ready for it.

But attempts at detailed predictions and chronologies ultimately undermine the call of Advent. They produce, where they are believed, what C. S. Lewis called "a local scare." And when the scare goes away, so does attention to the idea that Jesus is coming. In fact, the disillusionment produced by the failed scenario makes the whole idea of the Second Coming seem silly.

We can cultivate a truer and more helpful Advent expectation if we understand how the coming of Christ is related to the lives we live as Christians in this world. Christ's coming is the true end of every Christian life. We can truly desire and prepare for his coming only if we see it as the culmination of our lives, the very end of faith—as opposed to an unwanted intrusion.

In Revelation, Jesus says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end" (1:8). Jesus is the one through whom the Father created the world in the beginning and he is the one for whom the world was made. The world will find its true meaning and purpose when he is acknowledged universally as its Lord.

Christ is the beginning and the end of the church. The church was created through him on Pentecost. He is the One towards whom the church points. Every prayer, every sacrament, every good work done in faith points toward the hope: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done."

Christ is the beginning and the end of each Christian life. The baptismal gift of the Spirit causes us to be born again. What begins in baptism looks forward to an end, which is the Second Coming and Resurrection.

Christ is the beginning and the end of the week. The Lord's Day, Sunday, is the first and eighth day. We gather around the altar to begin the week in Christ. And we gather around the altar to end the week in him. The encounter with Christ cleanses and heals all that is amiss in the week past, and raises us up to new life for a new week. As Jesus said, "Behold, I make all things new" (Revelation 21:5).

Christ came to Jerusalem the first time in humility as the Alpha, to die that death that was the beginning of the new covenant. And Christ will come the second time as the Omega, the end point of faith, to bring the covenant to its promised fruition.

There is no shortage of proposed cataclysmic endings to the world as we know it. There are "scientific" proposals in which earth is hit by a comet or an asteroid. There are proposals in which the tragic use of nuclear, or other weapons, brings about a man-made ending. And then there are the popular religious proposals to which we have referred.

The biblical promise that Christ will come again in glory doesn't really tell us anything about the details—about the truth or falseness of any scenario. But it does tell us this: Jesus is Lord. He is in control. Just as the chaos of the ancient world became, by providence, the fullness of time for Christ's birth; so the chaos of the modern, or post modern, or future world will become, by providence, the fullness of time for Christ's glorious return.

Our lives and this world are heading for the glorious ending God has planned. Come what may, when the dust settles, Christ will be revealed, we will be changed, the world will be renewed and sin and death will be no more. If we die before his coming, this will remain our hope. For those who are absent from the body and present with the Lord are still waiting for his coming, still looking forward to the day of resurrection and fulfillment.

We prepare for such a glorious ending, not with concern about the details, but with the focus on Christ, who is the Alpha and Omega. As Christ comes to us at the altar now, as we say "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord," we anticipate that final coming, which is the goal and true end of life in Christ.