

Waiting for the Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ

18th Sunday after Trinity

(From *the Epistle*: 1 Corinthians i.4 ff.)

4 I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ; 5 That in every thing ye are enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge; 6 Even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you: 7 So that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ: 8 Who shall also confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I believe with all of my heart that the Second Coming of Christ is a doctrine of tremendous value and import to the Church today, but one that is sorely neglected. Why this is true has intrigued me. The topic occupies large portions of the New Testament canon. There are allusions to it many of the books, Gospels and apostolic writings alike, that comprise this portion of Scripture. But it seems paradoxical that the ancient church should be so consumed with the significance of an event that still has not come to pass, two thousand years hence. Is this some mistaken notion on their part, this eager awaiting of Christ's return? Or rather does it speak of their high spirituality, whereas the indifference and unconcern that characterize much of the contemporary church on this same subject are a very real indicator of its own state of spiritual malaise?

The attitude associated with awaiting Christ's return as it is expressed in the Bible is one of fervent, breathless expectation. It is filled with that dynamic tension and excitement that accompany a great longing to see a cherished hope finally fulfilled. Consider some of the language that is employed in various passages:

-most versions other than the KJV include the adverb *eagerly* to *waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ* in today's Epistle.

-...*we wait for the blessed hope--the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ...* (Titus 2:13)

-*May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.* (1 Thess. 3:13)

-...*on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed.* (2 Thess. 1:10)

-*Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present [you] faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy...* (Jude 24)

-...*Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching*

It reflects the attitude of those who have long and desperately awaited the return of a loved one. Nothing else in their lives matters more than this earnest watch for that arrival. They keep a faithful, steady lookout, to the point of embarrassment of those of lesser, tamer passions.

It would only seem logical that *as the day* [of Christ's return] *approaches* our anticipation of it would rise proportionately. It is here that the Lord's own parables regarding His return are of

special significance, because in them He portrays the varying attitudes of those who await His return.

In the “Parable of the Ten Virgins” (Matt. 25:1-13), there are two groups depicted who await the coming of the bridegroom, one foolish, the other wise. His arrival was long delayed, so they all fell asleep. When a great cry is suddenly sounded that the hoped for moment was finally upon them, it was nighttime. But only half of the virgins were able to find their way to the bridegroom, having carefully planned ahead and purchased sufficient oil for their lamps. The rest of the virgins stumbled about in the darkness, and by the time they obtained oil for their lamps, it was too late. The door to the bridegroom’s chamber was locked to them. They had been judged unworthy of his company by their sloth and carelessness associated with His return: “*Lord, Lord, open to us!*” they cried. *But he answered and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.'*” The oil in the lamps can be likened to faith, faith that waits patiently and trustingly for one’s beloved.

In another parable dealing with His return, Christ speaks of those who await Him as servants in a house whose master has gone away (Matt. 24:43-51). Again, the test for the servants is the long delay of the master in his promised return. One servant faithfully discharges his duty of *ruling over his household*, but the other *evil servant*, tired of the wait, *begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards*. His patience has run out, and his own concerns eclipse those of his master. Because he has defaulted on his duties, his end will be a miserable one indeed.

Along with these passages which speak very specifically about the attitude with which one anticipates the Second Coming, our Lord warns His followers in no uncertain terms of the nature of the times surrounding His return, and the importance of a posture of wholehearted readiness. *Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming* is sounded out as an urgent warning, after extensive descriptions of days rife with deception, confusion, turmoil, uncertainty, and fear. This same theme is taken up in the apostolic writings concerning the Second Advent.

We can clearly see that Scripture has much to teach us on this theme, and that the nature of the message is hardly tame, or easy-going, or passive. Rather, it is charged with intensity, and with all of the martial duties associated with looking toward a momentous occasion, one with a joyous outcome, but nevertheless fraught with danger and opposition, requiring strict obedience and great presence of mind.

So, once again, why is the topic so significantly absent from the pulpits of the church? And, if it is dealt with, why is it given such fantastic, speculative treatment, complete with out-

landish guesses of dates and times and efforts to identify the principals involved, evoking nothing other than idle fascination?

I can offer many reasons for our consideration. Chief among them, of course, is that God's fateful enemy is devoted to obfuscating this very issue, for it portends his doom, and the vindication before all the universe of God's redeemed people. No wonder he labors so intensely to throw this topic into such disrepute!

But along with the enormous power over the minds and hearts of men exercised by the devil (1 Jn. 5:19), are our own proclivities, and we should look at these closely. There is a real sense that the topic of Christ's return is somehow way beneath our dignity. Who has time for it? What, after all, does it have to do with anything... with the stock market, with the education of my children, with getting my weekly paycheck, whatever? We are way too busy and too preoccupied with the processes of this life to even begin to take hold of an abstract theme that seems to force us to go in a completely different direction.

Furthermore, there is a grim finality associated with the thought, even for the practicing church. Why, we have our programs of evangelism to fulfill, our agendas to accomplish, our quotas to meet. Why should Christ interrupt us and call a halt to our half-finished plans by reappearing? This means, of course, that we cherish our own ideas far more than we do Christ's. It is more than a paradox that the church should be too busy nervously and compulsively performing the work of the Lord to step aside and consider His return! Everything is in such a frenzy of horizontal movement that to confront the sudden and "vertical" arrival of the Lord would be a collision of colossal proportions!

It is also a doctrine that requires us to be *grown up*, the last thing most of us wish to be. To grow up is to assume mature responsibilities, to cease from playing games and to shoulder adult tasks, to stop making excuses for ourselves and to take the full burden of both our successes and our failures (see 1 Cor. 13:10, 11). An infantile church much prefers the nursemaid of good music, outstanding preaching, a high community profile, and the next new idea of how to reach the world, than to stand face to face in front of... *the Father*! When Christ arrives, the party will end. The curtain will be permanently drawn across the stage of all the works of men. There will be no more room for pleasant procrastination.

The problem with the Hollywood-ized depictions of the end times and the return of the Lord that have become so popular is that they serve to place the matter at a convenient distance from the individual and even from the church. They convince the viewer that he can be a dispassionate bystander, like someone in attendance at some staged event, able to keep it all carefully under control. involving himself only to the extent he wishes or desires. But this is a an absurd

and laughable deception, for the coming of Christ will be *as the lightning that flashes out of one part under heaven and shines to the other part under heaven* (Luke 17:24).

The Bible tells us that a holy preoccupation with Jesus' reappearance is in the very best interest of the church. This is stated in many ways. St. John puts it thus: *...we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.* In other words, those who with expectation look for the Lord will keep themselves pure since they anticipate stepping into His very presence. It is an enormous motivator to lead a holy life. St. Paul wrote to his disciple Titus in a similar vein:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ...

Elsewhere the apostle comes at it from another direction (Col. 3:2-4):

Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.

It's as if the essence of what we are, as the redeemed, is invisible now both to us and to others. At the revelation of Christ (His Second Coming), we will appear with Him in glory, in other words, be shown, before all, who and what we actually have become as God's children. What a truly great moment that will be!

When the church proclaims this doctrine in power and conviction, it puts the whole world on notice that its proud rush to progress will some day be interrupted, that its destructive presumption that it is sole judge and jury to all its actions will be humiliatingly overturned. It will serve to encourage those who have been convinced that justice can go no higher than that which man arbitrarily metes out. It will fuel the fires of conviction in the consciences of all men, both good and bad, that no action will be able to be conveniently and permanently divorced from its consequence. Having found its voice finally, as it were, the church will at last experience first hand what it means to be *the pillar and ground of the truth* (1 Tim. 3:15), and will walk in the great dignity of that calling.

We must pray that the Church will dare to read boldly and out loud every line of the script that God has given her to proclaim!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.