

*His wife has made herself ready.*

*(Rev 19:7b)*

The First Sunday in Advent

Contemplating the impending rule of Jesus Christ at His Second Coming affords me a necessary perspective when I view the immense challenges that this age we live in poses to our Christian faith. I say “immense” because the challenges come at us from several angles.

For one, the context of support for our faith no longer exists in our communities. We cannot count on most of our fellow-Americans assenting to Christian principles, even in a half-hearted sort of way. This means that it is up to us both as churches and individuals to find ways to stoke the fire of our faith. Should our flame burn low, we cannot look to anything around us to serve to relight it. The land has become dark. It is the darkness of the abandonment of faith in God, and the consequent rise of what the Scriptures call *iniquity* and *lawlessness*: *Because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold*, are Jesus’ fearful words in His sermon describing conditions prior to His second advent in Matthew 24. The gradual turning of day into night has been so slow, and so subtle, that we can barely discern how different the land has become --the land where our lives are lived out, which we call “home”. Where once we could depend upon good will, shared values, the security of a government which represented our ideals, and a resulting confidence in the future, we are left with a certain bleakness that borders on despair.

Another of our challenges rests in the condition of the Church. Even if it were filled with star-studded heroes of the faith, I don’t see how it could remain uninfluenced by the pervasive and willful turning away from God that describes the principal spirit of our times. It has been forced into a defensive posture by attacks on its belief and practice: “guilty until proven innocent” would describe the verdict it has received from its active opponents, and there is no one from around the Church rushing to vindicate it. Its efforts to present the faith to ears either indifferent or even hostile have led to reliance upon consumer-driven means that have served to blunt the force and power of the Gospel it has been commissioned to bear. But the Church is also fractured by its divisions, and has no united voice. Its much-publicized sins have only offered another convenient excuse to those looking for a reason to not be bothered with it. The Church has lost its authority to inform the conscience of the people.

Pretending that things are different won’t make them so. Sentimentality for the past, or longing for better days, are equally fruitless and ineffective. But affirming the promises to us from God’s Word, especially in the face of such circumstances, is the one way we have of establishing certainties that defy even the worst of what faces us. Empowered by the Scriptures, we

can look forward to Christ's return --we *must* look forward to it-- as the "blessed hope" that will alone resolve these great, new challenges that all believers everywhere face.

What do we find in God's Word that we can securely hold on to in this hour? As we await His coming, we have a task. It is one of preparation:

(From Luke 12:) 35 *"Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning; 36 and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately. 37 Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching... 40 Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. 47 And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes... 48 b For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more.*

In the Book of Revelation, the meeting of the Church with Christ is described in this way:

*...the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready. 19:7b*

The similitude of a "marriage" is used by the Lord elsewhere when He addresses His disciples about His Second Coming:

(From Matthew 25:) 1 *Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom... 6 And at midnight a cry was heard: 'Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!'*

The Church is to be *prepared*. It is to be busy doing what the Master has commanded it, but always with a posture of readiness. It must know His *will* and be prepared to *do according* to it.

I want to focus on one very specific aspect of the Master's will that surely must be a major part of our preparation for His arrival, although we hear little of it. I find myself increasingly concerned about it, because I think its fulfillment by the Church will not only prepare it for Christ's return, but will assist it in regaining its lost place of witness in the world. It is found in Christ's words in the prayer that concluded His last sermon to His disciples before His crucifixion:

(From John 17) 11b *Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are... 20 I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; 21 that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me 22 And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: 23 I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.*

It is Christ's will *that they may be one*. Would it be allowable to say that since the Church is certainly implicated in its own disunity, that it must be capable of participating actively toward its unity, and thus *making itself ready* for marriage to the Lamb?

What does this mean in practical terms? Surely, and most of all, it is *being made perfect in love* (from 1 John:4)! Our love for each other within God's Church is the key both to its earthly mission and its preparation for Christ's return: 17 *Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this*

*world*. To the extent that the Church is *one*, and demonstrates that oneness through the infallible proof of *love*, it will be ready both to leave earth and to meet Christ.

Presently, the church is divided, and there seems little hope of reunification. The gulf that separates Catholic from Protestant, or both from the Eastern Orthodox, appears immeasurable. The divisions are so great that Christ's prayer toward oneness is generally viewed either as some invisible reality that exists in spite of the disunity (a "spiritual" oneness), or as the presentation of some sort of ideal whose fulfillment can be consigned only to eternity, where alone it will be possible. Can this really be so?! Could Christ have prayed in such vague, idealistic terms, and can the hand of man be so powerful in schism that the hand of God cannot prevail as a consequence of Christ's own prayer? I cannot accept such an idea.

But how can we move toward such a state of oneness and perfected love that will serve bountifully both to advance the Gospel and to prepare us for Christ's return and *the day of judgment* that will immediately follow? First must come the recognition by all sectors of the Church of the grievous sin of our divisions. This won't come with finger-pointing and a rehashing of each and every argument used to justify and perpetuate the schism. It will not come by the proclamation of any one unit of divided christendom that it alone represents "the true church", because the true church can be found in nothing less than the inclusion of all of its divided members.

The path is naming the sins that have been committed, owning them fully, i.e., acknowledging ones participation in them and promotion of them, followed by repentance, and then prayerful resolution to following whatever Spirit-guided means God ordains to heal the awful fracture that has occurred.

I spoke earlier of "affirming the promises to us from God's Word" as the only means we have in these days of "establishing certainties that defy even the worst of what faces us":

*But Jesus looked at them and said to them, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."(Matt. 19:26)*

*Jesus said to him, "If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes. (Mark 9:23)*

Amen!

As we move through Advent, let us pray that God will grant the Church every grace toward the fulfillment of its mission on earth, that it might also be prepared as a bride for His return.

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