

Advent I Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

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Blessed is he that cometh in the Name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest.

All the themes of the four Sundays in Advent are there for us in our Gospel reading. Today, the Church reminds us of the duty of preparation, both for the celebration of Christ's first coming at Christmas, and for his second coming at the end of the age. As opposed to shopping and office parties, we are told to prepare by prayer and love for one another. We are given examples both of preparedness, in the disciples and the crowd, and unpreparedness, in the Temple.

The next lesson of Advent is that the coming of Jesus Christ occurs according to the Scriptures, in fulfillment of the explicit prophecy of God. So in today's Gospel, Matthew highlights for us how Jesus' startlingly humble entry into Jerusalem was a fulfillment

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of the prophecy given through Zechariah. Christ came in fulfillment of the prophetic Scriptures; Christ will come again in fulfillment of the same sure promises. So we are bound to prepare for the Advent of God, and we do so first by attending to the written word of the Scriptures.

The third message of Advent is that we are prepared for Christ's Advent by the ministry of his Church. So in today's Gospel, two disciples are sent ahead to prepare the way for Jesus' coming.

Finally, the fourth lesson is that Christ himself prepares us and is ever present among us, as both Saviour and Judge. His coming is both salvation and condemnation. When he comes into Jerusalem, the crowd acknowledges him as the Royal Messiah. "Hosanna!" they cry, "Save, we beseech thee", "Save us, Lord." But the same coming of Jesus is to those who were in the temple, where Jesus overturned the tables and proclaimed judgment. These are then the

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four lessons of our four Sundays: The Duty of Preparation, Preparation by the Word, Preparation by the Church, and Preparation by Christ himself (see The Harmony of the Collects, Epistles, and Gospels. by Melville Scott).

But Advent has also had another four, the Four Last Things, which are Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell. It is that time of year when Christians are reminded of the shortness and uncertainty of human life. We are called upon to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom. Part of what knowing the time means, is knowing the limited and little time we have been given for repentance and amendment. It is also that time when Christians are reminded of the Last Judgment. The Church then calls on us to prepare to meet our God, in our own death, in the Last Judgment and in the Communion of Christ's birth.

Today, we reaffirm that we believe that Jesus Christ will come again with glory, to judge both the living and the dead. At his

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coming, all people must rise again, with their bodies, and shall give account for their own deeds. The proclamation of the Gospel always contains this within it, for “Jesus commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that it is he which was ordained of God, to be the Judge of quick and dead (Acts 10.42).” Christ shall come again.....to judge. “God hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.” (Acts 17.31) The judgment of God is given to Jesus Christ. “The Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son.” (John 5.22)

We consider Christ’s coming to judge with three things in mind. 1. The last judgment fulfils our innate desire for justice. We consider in this season the moral law of the Ten Commandments. Of what good is law, if there is no Judge or Justice? We do not see or experience satisfying justice in this world and life. The world is

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unjust, and life is not fair. Either you accept the murder and torture of innocents, and the ease and prosperity of the wicked, or you believe that the eternal justice of God is not fully actualized in this life. To a large extent, the Old Testament does not argue about life after death, but comes to believe, out of a profound desire for and faith in justice, in justice after death - in a reward and punishment beyond these years. That faith is simply an unwillingness to accept the world and life as it is. So the last judgment answers our God-given desire for meaning and truth and justice, which this world and our best efforts can never supply.

2. The last judgment is brought before us as a stern warning, to call us to repentance and amendment of life. When Christ comes, will he find your heart to be a den of thieves, or a house of prayer? How can we, in this temple, not tremble at the thought of Jesus cleansing the temple of old? He cast them out. On that day, he will say, "Depart from me ye cursed into everlasting fire" (Matthew

25.41), for inasmuch as we have failed to love our neighbour, we have failed to love Christ himself. “Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen (Revelation 1.7).”

On that day, all our haughtiness, all our backbiting, all our neglect, all our abuse and spite and hatred and pride and pettiness, will be accounted against him who is our Judge. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.” (2 Corinthians 5.10) So the second coming of Christ calls us to prepare, by a sincere repentance and whole-hearted amendment of our life, and most especially by giving up the pretence of our own righteousness, and trusting rather in his.

3. The return and judgment of Christ should fill us with hope.

He who comes is our Saviour. The Judge is our Advocate, Brother,

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Redeemer and Friend. St. Paul refers to the second coming as “our salvation” which is “nearer than when we believed”. Jesus promises, “He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life (John 5.24)”. “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 8.1) What will fill some with dread and wailing, ought to fill us with joy and praise: “look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh”. (Luke 21.28)

That the last judgment should be unpopular among many Christians should not surprise us. We are soft on sin, especially our own, and therefore soft on judgment. If you do not believe that Christ rose from the dead, why would you believe that he is the Judge of the whole world? Yet, we cannot afford to forget or deny this. Our Lord cleansing the temple, overturning the tables, kicking out those who traded religion for commerce - this is our Advent

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Gospel. Our hearts are in the same shape. He that promised exaltation to the humble also pledged humiliation to the self-exalted. Christ shall come to judge, and in light of that judgment, let us turn from our sins, cast off the works of darkness and put on his righteousness. Let us look with hope, for the Judge is our Saviour. Finally, in light of that judgment, ours toward each other must often be suspended. “Why dost thou judge thy brother? ...for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.” Romans 14.10

After that triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus warned the people, “Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.” Matthew 23.39 Greet and hail him who comes to you, that as you joyfully receive him as your Redeemer, you may with confidence behold him when he comes to be your Judge. Your King and God and Saviour comes to you in meekness. Let this be our prayer today: “Hosanna, Save us Lord, Save us Lord, Save us Lord, Hosanna in the highest.