

Sunday Next Before Advent

I take as my text from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah:

BEHOLD, the days come, saith the Lord, that I shall raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth.

“Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be always acceptable unto Thee, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

We have finally arrived at the last Sunday in Trinity, the longest season of the Church Year and next Sunday we celebrate the beginning of a new year in the Christian Church.

But this is not a joyful celebration as is our secular observance but a celebration of anticipation. And while our thoughts may be focused on Christmas, the First Coming, Advent serves to refocus our thoughts on something difficult for us to even imagine: the Second Coming of our Lord.

Certainly, with the season of Advent, we begin a preparation for Christmas, the time to celebrate the moment God entered into the world having taken on our flesh for the purpose of redeeming mankind, all of creation, from sin, from Satan.

Yet, Advent is more than just an anticipation of Christmas. It is also a season when we turn our attention as Christians to "The Second Coming" and the "Last Judgment."

Paradoxically, we see the passage from Jeremiah, that we read as the Epistle lesson, apply both to the First Coming of our Lord, already accomplished, and to the Second Coming that we await, including the Last Judgment.

Most certainly, in Christian interpretation, Jeremiah's prophecy points to Jesus Christ as the expected Messiah and we see in our Lord the fulfillment of that prophecy of a "Righteous King" or "Ruler" whose reign will be marked by absolute judgment and who represents the ideal descendent of David. He is the Ideal, denoting the "branch" that is connected with the root and contains the "springs of life," and Who shall be called "The Lord of our righteousness."

As Christians we acknowledge Jesus Christ as our Saviour, our Mediator, and, at the last day, our Judge. Because He took upon Himself our flesh, we live in hope of His Judgment as He understands our human frailty; we live in certainty that we will be judged fairly and compassionately.

In reading about this Last Judgment, I was struck by a statement by Claude Beaufort Moss in his book, *The Christian Faith*:

"All will be judged according to what they have done, what they have omitted to do, and what opportunity they have had of doing otherwise."

Throughout our lives we are constantly warned of what we should do and what we shouldn't do, not only for the sake of salvation, but also for the sake of staying out of trouble legally and socially.

The Ten Commandments are explicit in what we should and shouldn't do.

Our whole approach to religious morality and societal standards is based on this one concept of good and bad.

But Moss reminds us of something else of equal importance: what we have omitted to do and what opportunity we have had of doing otherwise.

The approaching Holidays lend themselves as an illustration of Moss's points.

At Thanksgiving and Christmas, we all make a point of giving a little extra to help provide food and at Christmas gifts as well to those in need, the less fortunate. And this is well and good, even noble.

But, what about the rest of the year, and the same needy and less fortunate? Do we overlook them until the next Holiday Season rolls around?

In our places of work, in our daily chores, in our various activities and happenstance meetings, we have the opportunity of really "Living the Faith."

It's the spiritual equivalent to taking care of details and the opportunities are endless.

Another way to look at it is in the context of two current terms: proactive and reactive.

By proactive, making a positive, pre-emptive effort by seeking ways to Live our Faith.

By reactive, I mean reacting to situations and circumstances, making the determination of good or bad and then choosing, hopefully, the right course of action or response.

Of course, we are going to be constantly reacting to temptation and evil. But how much better off we would be spiritually if we were also proactive.

Perhaps, another term equally appropriate and understood is: preventive. Many of us in our careers apply preventive measures, preventive maintenance, or other actions that are pre-emptive.

If we are so prone to being pro-active, pre-emptive, or preventive in our career or job-related functions, why are we not doing the same in our own lives, in our moral conduct, in our personal relationships, in our relationship with God?

Is it that the Last Judgment is in concept so vague and in time so distant?

One of the Parables that seems most appropriate at this time is one from St. Matthew which we call the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. In it, Matthew presents the picture of a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats.

Sheep, in those days, perhaps even today, were considered to be mild, simple, innocent, patient, and useful; while goats, on the other hand, were considered to be quarrelsome, lascivious, and ill-scented.

The Parable, when taken in terms of the Last Judgment, depicts Jesus, the Chief Shepherd, separating the nations into two groups: one, the sheep, to sit on His right hand, the place of honor and favor; the other, the goats, on His left hand, the place of dishonor and shame.

As expected, the sheep nations represent those who are beneficent and capable of unconscious and unaffected goodness; innately kind, with inward faith. They are rewarded by being placed on the right hand.

While the goat nations represent those who are riotous, profane, and impure; innately and unconsciously selfish, given up to their own passions and lusts and who fail to see the needs of others; lacking heart of compassion. Naturally, they are placed on the left hand.

Quoting from St. Matthew: "Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world," and again, "Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels."

If we are going to be proactive and live our faith, we must have that certain innate quality which allows us to be capable of unconscious and unaffected goodness. Of course, we can not even approach perfection in our earthly lives, so there is much that will be omitted and many opportunities lost or overlooked; fortunately, our Judge has lived as one of us and knows our weaknesses and human frailties and will judge us accordingly and fairly.

More importantly, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, did not leave us comfortless; He sent the Holy Spirit to dwell within us and within the Church, to strengthen us, enlighten us, and guide us.

Imbued with God's Grace, filled with His Love and a lively faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, we can look forward in joyful anticipation of our Lord's Second Coming just as we celebrate with joy His First Coming into the world. We can look ahead to the Last Judgment in certain confidence, though not certain of the day and the hour, rather certain of the Hope for eternal life in the Kingdom He has prepared for us.