

Advent 4

I take as my text today from St. Paul's First Letter to the Church in Philippi:

Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice. Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight O' Lord my Strength and my Redeemer.”

We are coming to the close of Advent both a season of expectation and a season of preparation: expectation of the annual celebration of Christ's First Coming and preparation for His Second Coming. Most certainly, as we approach the celebration of Christ's First Coming, just a few days from now, we are at the very height of anticipation.

Most of us have vivid memories as children of the excitement as Christmas approached, though more for secular reasons than for religious. Even if we had been well-schooled on the meaning of Christmas, there was still the lure of presents, not to mention the expected visit of good old St. Nicholas.

For a child, there is so much anticipation as Christmas approaches, and so much expectation.

But, as we grow older, as we mature, the emphasis we place on Christmas shifts from secular to religious. We are affected more and more by the experiences of life itself. As we mature inwardly, we become more and more aware of our spiritual nature.

Though I know that Advent is a penitential season, and that we should be concentrating more on the anticipated Second Coming of Christ through self-examination, and, yes, with fasting and prayer; still, I find it ever so difficult not to look with excited anticipation at this joyous festival.

For it is a celebration of that glorious moment in time when God entered the world in human form as a baby; taking upon Himself our flesh; becoming one of us for the purpose of redeeming us, so that we might become His adopted children and inheritors of eternal life; indeed, for the purpose of redeeming all of creation.

Truly, the awe of that first Christmas rightfully overshadows the solemnity of Advent; but it can never overshadow the anticipated Second Coming of Christ.

Awe and solemnity: if we compare the Epistle passage today from Philippians with the Gospel passage from St. John, we find both a joyful and a solemn anticipation of the Coming of Christ.

St. Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always." and he tells us that "The Lord is at hand."

From the brief passage we can sense a jubilant outburst of joy because our Lord Jesus Christ is coming, coming not only as Deliverer but also as our Judge.

And why should we be so exuberant about the prospect of this judgment?

Because it is Jesus Christ who will be our Judge. He Who lived among us; experienced our joys, sorrows, pain, and even death; yes, He Who knows our human frailty; it is He Who will be our Judge. Thus, we are assured that we will be judged fairly and tenderly.

As Christians, we know of the wondrous Love of God which has been revealed to us through His Son. So great was God's Love that "He sent His only Begotten Son" to redeem the world by taking our sins and nailing them with Himself to the Cross.

St. Paul stirs up in us the Messianic Hope anticipated in the Old Testament.

One of the past great scholars, Adolf Harnack, summed up this Messianic Hope in these terms: "He would bring God near; He would do justice; and He would deliver men from the burden of torment within our hearts."

Carrying forward this Messianic Hope as we turn to the Gospel passage from St. John, we see an interesting exchange between John the Baptist and a delegation from the Sanhedrin, a delegation made up of priests and Levites.

There was a growing expectation of a Messiah among the Jewish nation. Oppressed under Roman occupation, the Jews were eager for the emergence of a forceful leader who would be their Messiah, and rid them of the Roman yoke. There had even been a number of failed attempts at insurrection during the recent years.

Now, the Jewish leadership saw a glimmer of hope in John the Baptist. Even if he were not the Messiah, there could be a tie; perhaps he could be the forerunner.

However, their view of forerunner was more of an Elijah returned to earth, or of a prophet like Moses.

The Baptist assured them he is neither Elijah nor a prophet. He is a messenger; yes, a forerunner, but for a different kind of Messiah. And John the Baptist applies the words in Isaiah, referring to the preparation for the return of the exiled Jews from Babylon, to himself.

Those familiar words from Isaiah, the third verse of the 40th chapter:

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

When challenged by the Jewish leadership over his right to baptize Jews, treating them like proselytes, John's reply is definitive: his baptism with water is outward, symbolizing repentance and remission of sin; the Messiah's baptism is to be inward, "conveying the gift of the Spirit and the power to lead a new life."

The anticipatory nature of this Gospel passage makes it a fitting reading for Advent when taken in the context of the preaching of John the Baptist that the judgment of God upon the world was imminent: "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

That message has not changed; but our whole perspective has changed.

Unlike the Jews who were confronting John the Baptist, we, who have been baptized under the New Covenant, have come under the Law of Love. In a sense we have been set free; set free from the bondage of the Law; set free to prepare for the Second Coming of our Lord.

Unencumbered by legalisms, we can devote ourselves to those two commandments from our Lord which fulfill the Old Law and which will prepare us for the Day of Judgment: love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind; and love thy neighbor as thyself, carrying forward the old Law into a transforming new Law, the Law of Love.

During Advent, during this short period before Christmas, we take time to look inwardly at ourselves, to make a spiritual examination of our lives over the past year, to take stock of our spirituality.

How close have we come to fulfilling the Law of Love? How ready are we for the Second Coming and the Final Judgment?

We, because of our human frailty, will always fall short of the mark.

We may ask ourselves: have we made any progress in "loving our neighbor"? Not that we have to like everyone, or necessarily get along with everyone; but have we looked at others in the same light that we hope God sees us?

How do we love God?

Do we say to ourselves, "we must love God because that is what is expected of us as Christians," in essence, relegating our love of God to an intellectual state of mind.

Or, can we say that we love God as we do our mother or father, or children, that is, with our hearts?

What is the depth of our love of God? Does it reach deep down into our souls?

Indeed, these questions have been troubling since the early days of Christianity, not just the 21st century, and give us pause in these times to ponder mysteries of faith and points of theological exposition.

As we now come to the end of Advent, we find it high time to prepare spiritually for Christmas but more importantly to prepare for Christ's Second Coming, of which time only God knows.

For this unknown moment in time, we should “Be prepared.”

Yes, be spiritually prepared at all times.

We look to Christmas to celebrate our Lord's First Coming when He entered the world in great humility. Whereas we look to the Second Coming, when He will come in power,

In the First, He came to save: in the Second, He will come to deliver us, to succor and relieve; a loving Judge who will separate us from the chaff destined for Hell's Fire so that we may be received into paradise, and into His Heavenly Kingdom.