

Sunday Next Before Advent

I take as my text the *Epistle Lesson* from 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**, commonly called the *Sunday next before Advent*; and, next Sunday we celebrate the beginning of a new year in the Christian Church.

But this is not the same joyful celebration as is our secular observance but, rather, 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 — and all of creation — from sin, from bondage under 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, the passage from Jeremiah, that we read as the Epistle lesson, applies both to the *First Coming of our Lord*, already accomplished, and to the *Second Coming* that we await, including the *Last Judgment*.

Certainly, in the context of Christian interpretation, Jeremiah's prophecy points to Jesus Christ as the expected **Messiah**. We see in Him 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, denoting the **branch** that is connected with the root and that contains the **springs of life**.

Jesus Christ is the **Ideal** 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**, because 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, the **Ten Commandments** fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and summarized as the command to love God and to love your neighbor.

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.

Often, we have heard reference to *sins of omission and sins of commission* — what we have failed to do, as well as what we have done.

Sometimes, our sins of *omission* are much greater than our sins of *commission* as we falter in living up to even the basic requirements of a Christian as implied in the *Summary of the Law*.

Oh, how remiss are we in fulfilling our basic human duty and responsibility as creatures of God: to worship God, our Creator, to worship Him and to offer ourselves to Him in the spirit of that love by which we were created and are sustained.

However, Moss also refers to something else — *missed opportunities*.

We have many opportunities of really *Living the Faith*, once delivered, and fulfilling that basic human duty and responsibility.

The greatest opportunity is in *corporate worship*; but it also extends to our places of work, our daily chores, our various activities, and happenstance meetings.

It's the spiritual equivalent to the *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 well 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 careers or job-related functions, even in our social lives, why are we not doing the same in our spiritual lives, in our moral conduct, in our personal relationships, in our relationship with God?

Is it because the *Last Judgment* is a concept so vague, and in time so distant?

Perhaps to bring the point home, we can turn to one of the *Parables* that seems most appropriate at this time. It's from St. Matthew and found in the Second Lesson for Morning Prayer from the 25th chapter. We call it 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 a 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.*

So, we may ask ourselves: are we sheep or goats? Are we mild, innocent, and useful, or are we quarrelsome and ill-scented?

We may even ask ourselves: are we *pro-active* or *re-active*?

If we are going to be *pro-active* and live our faith, then we must embrace that certain innate quality which allows us to be capable of unconscious and unaffected goodness: *reason*. We alone are capable of *reason*, of thinking, of choosing.

We alone were created in the image of God with mental and moral capacities — rational human beings. We alone have the capacity to choose good over evil, love over hate, God over Satan. We alone can attain to that perfection promised by Jesus Christ and come to the fullness of life God intends for us.

Of course, we cannot 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.

As Christians, we may well be accounted as sheep who look to Jesus, the **Good Shepherd**, for comfort and safety for, indeed, He 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.

Through the *Apostolic Succession*, He has provided His flock with surrogate shepherds, not only to keep us within the fold, but also to lead us through the crags and crannies during our spiritual growth.

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 hopeful 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, we may be certain of the *Hope* for eternal life in the *Kingdom* He has prepared for us.