

“Ending with Christ”

Luke 21: 25-33

Advent 1C, Boise, 2021 [after Montevallo & Birmingham, Alabama, 1989]

I said two Sundays ago in my sermon on the destruction of the Second Temple that we had not done with the prophecies of Daniel, and certainly not with this one that our Lord cites of the coming of the Son of Man with the clouds of heaven to the Ancient of Days [Dan 7: 13]. The author of 1 Maccabees applied that apocalyptic scene to the deliverance of persecuted Jews from the Syrian occupier Antiochus IV, and Jesus to the coming destruction by the Romans. But the prophecies of Daniel do not stop at either of those events. They take us to the end of the time in which we are now living, when, with the voice of the Archangel and blast of the trumpet, the bodies of those who died in Christ will awake from their sleep [1 Thes 4: 16] and be reunited with their souls. A prophecy is not completely fulfilled until it is filled full. This prophecy that Christ gives us in today’s Gospel, of the Son of Man’s coming with the clouds, looks beyond the “end” of the Second Temple, and the kind of Judaism that was based on it, to the end of the present age.

The OT reading today gives us another illustration of the progressive fulfillment of prophecy. The closing chapters of the book of Zechariah are about the deliverance of the saints from Israel’s enemies and the return of the King, the LORD himself, to Jerusalem. We see the fulfillment of one of the first prophecies in the sequence with the arrival of Jesus and his disciples in the city:

Behold, your king is coming to you;
righteous and having salvation is he,
humble and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey [Zech 9: 9].

Later, we have the prophecy that the inhabitants will look “on him whom they have pierced” [13: 10]. Then in our reading today, almost at the end of the

book, we have another, which the NT does not cite. The nations come against Jerusalem, and the LORD delivers the people who are left in her. He first stands on the Mount of Olives, splitting it in two to create a valley — which the people use as a way of escape, fleeing as the inhabitants did “from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah, King of Judah. Then,” Zechariah writes, “the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him” [14: 5]. With Yahweh again resident in the city, “the living waters” that flow from it go out to the surrounding lands [v. 8], just as they had from the Garden of Eden.

When will all that come to pass? It’s our guess, for, as I said, the particular prophecy does not reappear in the NT. Perhaps at the close of the millennium mentioned in the 20th chapter of Revelation, when Satan is unbound and there is a final burst of evil, before the enemies of God are consumed by fire from heaven, and the Devil tossed into the lake of fire [Rev 20: 7]. The renewed earth then gets a New Jerusalem, descending from Heaven to replace the old [chap. 21].

We can get lost in the details of Biblical prophecy, and will become frustrated if we try to figure out the future by applying them. The really important thing they do is to give us the broad outline of the story of how God returns as the King to rule the peoples of the earth — which in the end includes all those whom He resurrects to share his eternal life in both body and soul. The story had its crucial turn when God sent his Son to begin that return of his Reign on earth, which is the subject of the Gospel. Today, on the First Sunday in Advent, we concentrate on something that lies ahead, the Son’s coming again in glory. Christ will return whether we want him to or not, and at a time the Father appoints, neither sooner nor later. Our Gospel today describes the lead-up to that event in the figurative language that the OT prophets used for nearly all Divine judgments — signs in the heavenly bodies, “the sea and waves roaring,”

and what not. But the Second Coming itself will not be a figurative event. It will be literal and real.

What we are admonished to do is to prepare for it and the Judgment that will soon follow. So how do we do that — prepare? How do we live, knowing how the story ends? The first thing, I should think, is simply to keep remembering that it will end. If we live knowing that the world as know it now will end, then, while enjoying what there is to enjoy in it, we can avoid becoming absorbed in it. It would be very foolish to attach ourselves too strongly to things that will not last. The time will come, our Lord says, when “the powers of heaven will be shaken” — or, in other words, the whole order of things will be upset. Then, the things that we have always felt we could rely on will simply no longer be. Only our faith, our trust in God, will secure us.

We are used to asking for God’s blessing upon our present lives. But if we consider the doctrine of Christ’s Second Coming, we learn that one day God will bring upon mankind a *crisis*, which is the NT’s word for judgment. The Lord will rudely interrupt the life of everyone alive on earth, and prevent him or her from continuing to live it in the same manner. Such should give us pause and lead us to question what our lives are for. If our lives are for God, we should be comfortable with the fact that he can stop them any time he choses. It is his right, you might say. God created the world; he can end it any time he pleases. And, in this Gospel we have read today, our Lord says that someday he will. The Messiah’s prophecy of the end, the unavoidable end of mankind’s life in this world and of everything here we have become familiar with, should make us aware — it should make us understand — that the condition of human existence is sharply limited. The condition of our lives is limited, and the limits are set by God. We cannot go beyond those limits unless God wills to remove them. We cannot live beyond the narrow bounds set for us unless God gives us new life, surpassing the old.

Is my exposition of the doctrine of Christ's Second Coming too abstract? Well, let us then consider the teaching in a more personal way. We know that the Messiah issued the prophecy of his Return many centuries ago. Since it has been many centuries, is the prophecy still believable? Is it believable in anything more than as a Church dogma, an official teaching that we recite dutifully on Sundays when we say the Creed? — I suppose what I am asking is whether or not we can conceive of the Second Coming of Christ as occurring in our lifetime? Why not? If it is a Divine prophecy, then it has to occur in someone's lifetime. In our text today, our Lord says of those who witness the signs, "This generation shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled." — Here, I believe, our Lord was deliberately ambiguous. The apostles may have construed the remark as pertaining to them — and it did in the destruction of Jerusalem — but since the signs that Christ enumerated are probably figurative and thus widely applicable, "this generation" might mean any generation — including our own.

We shouldn't try to make predictions, of course. Yet we should seriously consider what is possible. What if our lives here were to be broken off by Christ's Coming? What if all the little worlds we have tried to build for ourselves were to be ended by the End itself? Would we be ready for it? Would we regard the life that we have been living as worthwhile? Would our present activities — going to school, teaching school, working at a job, raising a family, planning for the future, enjoying retirement — would any of those activities still be regarded by us as important if God were to bring them to an immediate and abrupt end? Or would we see them as activities merely to occupy time, so long as time lasted? — Those are not vain questions. They are the questions we should ask when we consider the prophecy and the doctrine of our Lord's Second Advent.

That is why I say that the Christian religion teaches us to live with the end in view. If we have been living for God and for Christ, then we cannot regard Christ's Coming as an interruption. We can answer all those questions I raised with a resounding "yes," if we do live with the end in view, and order our activities toward it. Yes, school is worthwhile; it will prepare me for a life that will reach its meaningful conclusion with the Coming of Christ. Yes, my job is worthwhile; the work I do will lead to that same good conclusion. Raising a family is not in vain; it is not simply something we do in order to occupy the little time we have been allotted on this earth. All our activities in the world can have meaning if they are performed with the knowledge that each has its end. The ancient Greek philosopher said the same. For the Christian, the proper end of every activity is Christ, who himself is beyond the world. He is the Word by whom God brought the world into existence, and by whom also he will one day bring it to its appointed end. Christ is both the Alpha and the Omega.

Our lives today, which are strictly limited by time, can find their fulfillment only in God's Kingdom, which is timeless. That Kingdom, which Christ administers, moves toward completion even when the world is failing. And before too much longer, it will arrive in its fullness with the visible Coming of his Person.

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