

A sermon preached on 1 Advent, November 28, 2021
 at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT
 by The Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton

Jeremiah 33:14-16 Psalm 25:1-9 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 Luke 21:25-36

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What thoughts and feelings come to your mind as you look ahead to the last weeks of 2021?

As the ancient Roman Empire focused on raucous festivals to end the year, our early Christian ancestors began the new liturgical year in December focusing on the new things Christ would accomplish when he came back to earth again. They created a season they called Advent, which means coming. Each of today's Scriptures include the word "coming". The Advent season calls our attention to the three comings of Christ. Christ 1st coming was as a baby in Bethlehem, which will be our focus throughout the 12 days of Christmas, beginning on December 25th. Our 2nd focus during Advent is on Christ's daily coming to dwell with us and within us spiritually. Christ promised to send us his Holy Spirit to be with us always, so he said, "Don't let your hearts be troubled or afraid." Then our 3rd focus is on Christ's promise that he will come again to earth, as we see in today's Gospel, "in a cloud, with power and great glory" to bring the human race, human history to a glorious fulfillment, bringing God's new creation, God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

My guess is that most of us have not given much thought to Christ coming again, in the future. Yet, for most of Christian history, the primary focus of Scriptures assigned to be read in the first weeks of Advent were about Christ's future coming to earth again. Christians during the Advent season was preparing for Christ's next coming to earth. They did not focus on his first coming as a baby in Bethlehem until the end of the month. Many Christians spent the weeks of Advent fasting and praying to be ready to meet Christ when he comes again.

How will we know when Christ will come again? The first disciples asked Jesus this question. Jesus answered, no know knows. Even Jesus didn't know, but only his Father in heaven.

Yet in today's Gospel, Jesus speaks in poetic, symbolic language about the signs we can look for that will signal Christ's 2nd coming to earth. Jesus says, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves." This language makes us think of the many international conflicts of the past year and the devastating hurricanes, fires, droughts, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions in the past year.

How will people respond to these cosmic signs in creation? Jesus says, "People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken."

During this past year, we have seen and felt lots of fear and foreboding about the future of our nation and world. In addition to the hundreds of thousands of deaths from Covid, our nation has experienced a significant increase of what are called “deaths of despair”, deaths by suicide from drugs and opioids and by self-inflicted gun violence. Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel reflect what we are seeing around us and around the world: People are fainting and dying from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world.

After these signs, Jesus says, “Then they will all see the Son of Man (Jesus the Messiah, Christ the King) coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”

I wonder, will our global access to media make it possible for people all around the world to literally see on their screens when Christ comes again, with power and great glory? I wonder what Christ’s power and great glory will look like?

Jesus tells us that, when we see him returning to planet earth with power and great glory, we don’t have to be afraid. He says, “When these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Help is on the way. God’s Kingdom is coming and now God’s will shall be done. God will make everything “right” on earth as in heaven.

So how do we prepare for this final coming of Christ? In a contemporary translation of today’s gospel, Jesus says: “Be on your guard. Don’t let the sharp edge of your expectation of my return get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise, that Day is going to take you by complete surprise, spring on you suddenly like a trap, for it’s going to come on everyone, everywhere, at once. So, whatever you do, don’t go to sleep... Pray constantly that you will have the strength and wits to make it through everything that’s coming and end up on your feet before the Son of Man” that is, before Christ the King of the Universe, when he comes again.

What will Christ expect of us when he comes again? Some of us were raised with a long list of rules and regulations we thought we had to fulfill in order to be acceptable to God, so we have spent our lives feeling guilty for all we did not think or say or do that was right.

We need to remember the hopeful words of Jesus in today’s Gospel. He said, we don’t need to be afraid, but we are to stand up, because he is coming back to make everything right. There will be an element of judgment. We are accountable to God for all our thoughts, words and actions, for all we leave undone that we should have done.

One image the Bible uses frequently to describe God’s judgment is the image of a refiner’s fire that purifies gold and silver. The fire brings the dross, the impurities to the surface so they can be skimmed off and the pure metal preserved. Perhaps Christ’s last judgment will be a purification in the fire of God’s love. Then God will skim off all that we have thought and said and done and left undone which was not pleasing to God, while God will preserve all that we have thought, said and done which was loving and pleasing to God.

There is so much we do not know about what it will be like when we meet Christ at his 2nd coming. We can get some clues about what it will be like by looking at how Jesus welcomed people during his three year ministry on earth at his first coming.

Remember the love Jesus showed for the thief on the cross next to him. He was obviously a criminal. But he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Jesus replied, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

Remember what Jesus said to the religious and military leaders and crowds who gave him an unjust trial and crucified him? "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."

Remember what Jesus said to his disciples after they denied and abandoned him in his hour of greatest need? His first words to them were, "Peace be with you", and later he said, "I will be with you always, to the end of the ages."

So how do we prepare to meet Christ at our death or at his second coming with power and great glory, whichever comes first?

In today's second reading, Paul prays for some early followers of Jesus, as they prepare for Christ's coming again: "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all." Paul says, we prepare to meet Christ face to face by prayerfully practicing love for all. All means all, no exceptions.

So how might we use this week and this whole Advent season to help us prepare for Christ's 2nd coming at the end of the world and also to welcome Christ's daily coming into our lives?

Let me suggest 2 spiritual practices for us to embrace this Advent: Listen & Love. Let's say those together: Listen and Love. Listening helps prepare us to love. We begin by listening to God's Word in Scripture. In the back of the church we have many resources to help us reflect on Scripture passages each day of Advent. For over 50 years, Rebecca and I have used an Advent Wreath and short daily service of Scripture readings, reflections and prayers to help us keep our focus on listening to and loving Christ during Advent.

We also need to listen to God speaking in our neighbors and families. Busyness often prevents us from listening. We can practice slowing our minds and our movements so we can listen better to God and to our families, friends and neighbors. As we listen more attentively, God will show us how to love our neighbors better, even those we have a difficult time loving.

And we also need to listen to ourselves. God often speaks to us in our daily lives, but we miss Christ's communications to us by thinking and moving too fast and distractedly without pausing to listen to what God might have tried to say to us through our bodies, emotions and experiences. As we listen to our bodies, to the way we talk to ourselves and think about ourselves, God can help us learn to be more loving toward ourselves, learning to love ourselves as Jesus loves us.

I wonder what difference it could make in our lives this week, this Advent if we as a community made a commitment to practice pausing for perhaps 5 minutes at the beginning of each day to ask God to help us listen and love better throughout the day?

And at the end of each day, what might happen if we again pause for just a few minutes, to reflect with Jesus about how we practiced listening and loving throughout the day? What did I

learn from today? Don't spend the evening time criticizing yourself. Simply observe how the day went, giving thanks that God was with you throughout the day, whether you were aware of God's presence or not. Ask for the grace to learn from the day's experience how to grow in listening and loving during the next day.

Let's close our eyes, take a slow, deep breath, and be aware that right now, we are right now in the presence of Christ who is looking at us with eyes of love... Aware of his love for you, ask Jesus to help you take some new steps in your relationship with him during this Advent season... Talk with Jesus about how you could begin each day this Advent with a focus on listening to and loving God, all your neighbors and yourself in little ways throughout the day ahead....

Then talk with God about how you might end your days this Advent with gratitude, paying attention to the ways you were able to listen and love over the past day...asking to learn from the experiences of the past day...and asking for help to grow in listening and love for God, your neighbors and yourself throughout the coming day.

O Jesus, day by day, during this Advent season we pray that you will help us keep growing in our practice of listening and loving you, all our neighbors and ourselves...as you listen to and love us, through the power of your Holy Spirit at work in us. Amen.