

First Sunday of Advent, A – November 27, 2016 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 8:30am and 11:00am Sunday Masses – 900 words

The first Christmas happened just over 2,000 years ago, and since that time we await Christ's second and final coming: when he will judge the living and the dead, when the world as we know it will pass away, and when he will inaugurate a new heavens and a new earth. Each day that passes is one day closer to that second coming, which in any case will occur at an hour we do not expect, as the gospel relates. His first coming was in humility and poverty, but his second coming will be in glory and majesty. These two comings of Christ are the focus of this liturgical season of Advent – a season of preparation, so that we, too, may be ready.

The Lord gives a serious and urgent warning in the gospel, but today it seems that so few take his words seriously. Many people live with their hopes set firmly on what this world has to offer. Many people live even as if God did not exist. Many Christians have lost a healthy “sense of sin”, forgetting or ignoring the fact that, as Scripture tells us, they will one day have to render an account for their entire life to God, who cannot be deceived. Indeed, many Catholics no longer make good use of the sacrament of Confession, either having abandoned it entirely or not receiving it regularly. And then, for nearly all of us, there can be the temptation to procrastinate: “I’ll take care of my spiritual health tomorrow.”

But the Lord warns us that people have long not taken him seriously. He first recalls what happened at the time of Noah – the people did not listen to Noah’s admonition and they went about their lives as they saw fit; ultimately they were destroyed, while Noah and his family were saved for heeding God. He then teaches that when his second coming occurs, not all will be ready – some will be taken, others left behind. Which group will we be in? Let us not fall into the trap of presumption, banking on being in the right group without undergoing the necessary conversion of life to be fit for it.

Here at the Cathedral we have such a beautiful Sacred Heart window, and I so enjoy looking at the Lord’s heart and contemplating his loving gaze, as he invites us to learn from him and find our rest in him. But hold that image in your mind, and fast forward to the moment of your particular judgment. Imagine that you were not ready at the moment the Lord came. And think about how his face turns sad, as he recounts how much grace he offered, how many inspirations he gave, how much he went the extra mile, how many priests and deacons he sent along the way to repeat his warnings,... and how, ultimately, you rejected him. Maybe that rejection was because of procrastination or presumption. Maybe it was because of neglect of the sacraments. Maybe it was because of a downplaying of one’s sins. Whatever the reason, his warning was not heeded, and so he must utter that dreadful sentence: “Depart from me...”.

“Oh, Father, surely you exaggerate”, some might think; “you’re just trying to scare us!” You’re darn right, I am! The Lord means business and he really couldn’t be any clearer in warning us. Others might say, “but Father, I haven’t done anything *really* bad...”. Well, don’t fall into that trap either! Mere mediocrity is enough to keep us out of heaven: remember how the Lord speaks in the Book of Revelation about spewing the lukewarm out of his mouth.¹ He holds us to a very high standard – and he offers us every grace to live according to that standard and become holy as he is holy. More than that, he himself entered into our world to show us the way and accompany us on the journey.

Therefore, our collect or opening prayer for this Sunday asked of God: “Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God, the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds at his coming, so that, gathered at his right hand, they may be worthy to possess the heavenly

¹ See Revelation 3:16

Kingdom”. The key word in that prayer is “resolve”: we must make a firm resolution to live as Christ commands and seek the remedies that he offers through his Church whenever we might fail. We might fail often; we might even fail spectacularly; but if we are dependent upon him and do not delay in running back to him, we will be amazed at the work of grace he will accomplish in us.

So how will you take advantage of this penitential season of preparation? Will you spend more time in prayer and spiritual reading? Will you return to the sacrament of Confession after a hiatus, or resolve to go more often? Will you seek more opportunities to serve others? Our post-Christian society has filled this time of year with so much hustle and bustle; we must make a deliberate decision to distance ourselves from all of that so that we do not omit to care for our souls and celebrate the real reason for the season. “Therefore, stay awake!”, Jesus says. May he help us to make a good and earnest preparation for Christmas, and so experience a foretaste of the life he offers us in heaven.