

First Sunday of Advent, B – December 3, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, AL – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 1,350 words

The Lord’s teachings about his return at an unknown hour are unsettling for most, terrifying for some. Will I be ready? Will I be “awake” and waiting for him? Or rather, will he find me “asleep”, which is a metaphor for not being fit to enter his heavenly kingdom? And if what Christ says about his second coming isn’t unsettling enough, there are plenty of other scripture passages that could, as it were, pour fuel on any fear one many have: one that comes to mind is from the prophet Malachi in the Old Testament, a passage immortalized by the great composer Handel in his oratorio, “The Messiah”; Malachi asks, “But who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appeareth? For he is like a refiner’s fire, like the fuller’s lye.”¹ God is so totally “other”; his holiness is so pure, his glory so burning – which one of us could ever be able to live in his presence and see him face-to-face? He is coming at an unknown hour, and who, indeed, shall stand when he appears?

The answer, we know, is that we can be able and we can be ready: not because any merit of our own but God’s gracious help. St. Paul addresses this in our second reading: “I give thanks to my God always... for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus”, he says. “He will keep you firm to the end, irreproachable on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful...” Our being ready to be with God depends upon him: not entirely, but in very great measure. As another passage reminds us, “we are God’s handiwork”² – each one of us is a project that the good Lord began, is sustaining now, and that he wishes to bring to completion. Of ourselves, we are unworthy and incapable. But through the transforming power of God’s grace, we can be in his presence now and hope to live with him for ever.

Many Catholics today have forgotten about grace; this is due, in part, to the fact that many priests and teachers hardly, if ever, speak about it. This failure is surely one of the works of the devil in our age, for grace is such a crucial component of our Christian life: indeed, as St. Paul teaches, “by grace you have been saved”.³ If it is what saves us – if it helps us to be ready and “awake” when the Lord comes – then you can be sure that we need to know about it, understand it well, and seek to live in it each day, so as also to die in it when the Lord comes for us. And the season of Advent – a penitential season of preparation for the coming of the source of grace into our world at Christmas – is a good time for us to take a personal inventory, not only of our understanding of the reality of grace but also of our status in it. When we die, no other “status” matters – not social status, not airline status – only our status in God’s grace.

Grace is a sharing in God’s supernatural life. It makes us alive to God. Since we have a supernatural destiny, we need supernatural means to attain it. Our souls give us natural life, which means they will sustain us only as far as the limits of this world. We need grace to be found pleasing to God now and be capable of living with him in the next world. We receive grace for the first time at baptism. I often think of the cleansing of the temple by Christ in the gospel as a good analogy for what happens when we are baptized. Just as he went into his Father’s house and drove out all that was not pleasing to him, so his grace powerfully enters our souls at baptism and casts out Original Sin and, if we are above the age of reason when we are baptized, also those personal sins that we had committed. In baptism, the grace of God completely transforms and renews us. It truly makes us born again and sets us on the path to our supernatural destiny.

¹ Malachi 3:2.

² Ephesians 2:10.

³ Ephesians 2:8.

Most people, however, lose the grace of God given at baptism through subsequent sin. We know there are two types of sin – mortal and venial. Venial sin weakens the grace of God in our souls and so disposes us to fall more easily into mortal sin. And mortal sin completely casts out God’s grace. If we die in the state of mortal sin we cannot enter into heaven; dying in mortal sin means being “asleep” when the Lord comes – and there is no forgiveness or second chance after death. God, in his great goodness, gives us countless second chances and always offers his forgiveness in this life. That forgiveness comes primarily through the sacrament of penance or confession. Every good confession that we make is like a new birth: it refreshes and renews us, restoring us to God’s grace or strengthening us further in it.

And then all of the other sacraments give us particular graces – special helps from God – besides. We don’t have time to review each one now. But if we make good and regular use of the sacrament of confession, and receive the other sacraments worthily and with the proper dispositions – especially the Holy Eucharist – then we can be sure to receive every grace from God that we need, not just to live an average or mediocre Christian life but, indeed, to become great saints. Grace, by its very nature as a supernatural gift and favor from God, transforms us. It brings out our better selves, helps us to rise to our God-given potential, works miracles in and through us, and helps us to respond favorably to all that God asks of us.

I said at the beginning that Christ’s warning about his return could even be terrifying. Many people are rather fearful when they consider what God requires of us. Just think about how hard it can be to live out the Ten Commandments, in all of their implications. Think about the commandment to love God and love neighbor. Think about how Jesus says, “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”.⁴ None of these things is easy. But with the help of God’s grace, we can always live the way he commands. I think there is a tendency nowadays to “fudge” on God’s grace, as it were – rather than seek it out in confidence, we punt and say, “Ah, in the end, God will forgive me. He’ll go easy on me.” Such an attitude is presumptuous. No, in humility, we need to seek out the means of grace and cultivate in our souls a confidence in God and his ability to transform us, especially through his sacraments. It often takes a while. But he will do it.

Advent is, as I said, a time of preparation. We dedicate so much energy to preparing for Christmas celebrations in our families, among friends, and at work – and often, nowadays, we hold these celebrations before Christmas even arrives! But how much do we put into our spiritual preparation? This Advent season, with its penitential purple, may not be as structured or focused a time of penance as Lent, but it is an important time nonetheless. How will you prepare? I especially want to invite those who may have neglected the sacrament of confession: if you have been away for a while or even a very long time, now is the time to fix that, and I am happy to help. Do not presume upon God’s grace in the future – seek it out now. Without God’s grace, we are the walking dead in this life and eternally dead in the next. That is a terrifying thing. But with his grace, we can have peace and confidence, knowing that he, as our patron says, “will keep [us] firm to the end”. Have great confidence in God’s grace, and seek to grow in it daily.

⁴ Matthew 5:48.