

ADVENT SUNDAY

29 Nov. 2020

CATHEDRAL EUCHARIST

So, Advent Sunday - the New Year's Day of the Church calendar. The four-week long season of Advent has two themes: the **Nativity** of Christ of course, and the **Second Coming** of Christ.

Now, I have it on the authority of Boris Johnson and his advisors that Christmas simply will not happen this year. If their predictions are correct, they are confusing the glitzy, mid-winter commercial spending spree that millions call 'CHRISTMAS', with CHRIST'S MASS. And whatever happens in the secular and commercial worlds, whether the restrictions are enforced or relaxed, and indeed whether places of worship are open or closed, Christian people, in groups, or alone, will celebrate the nativity of our Lord on December 25th, the time when God, as a tiny, helpless baby, came to earth for us and for our salvation. Christ's Mass has been marked for 2,000 years, in good times and in bad - and many of the bad times were dreadful, almost beyond belief. But, no matter, Christians have somehow, in some way, celebrated the God of the universe and the ages, come down as a tiny, helpless baby to save us and all humankind. Small wonder that Christ's Mass will most certainly be celebrated this year as in every year of the past 2,000 years.

The wondrous event of Christmas can't be spoiled, marred, by the tragedy of humankind's selfishness, our greed, our double-dealing, our war-making = all of which can be summed up in one, (not very popular) word today, wickedness. But nothing that we can do can detract from the sheer, breathless wonder of God the Father's love for us which He demonstrated by actually sending His Son, the Lord Christ, to us in order to save us from the results of our wickedness. And this is a timeless wickedness! We read both the OT and the NT and then throw up our hands in horror at the awfulness of those far off days. We stand detached and superior to the people of the middle ages with their 100 years' war and so on. Yet it goes on down to our own time - the endless horrific wars of the 20th century and the first 20 years of this century.

As Christmas once again approaches, we do well to turn to the second theme of Advent, the Second Coming of our Lord. We do well to spend time in candid and ruthless self-examination, self examination of ourselves, and of our national outlook, our national way. Tragically our ears seem not to hear Christ's words, "Follow me". Why are we unable to hear Him? These well-known words pull no punches:

*Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love-song that they bring;
O hush the noise, ye men of strife And hear the angels sing.*

Read this well-known carol as poetry. Sit quietly and listen to the words in your heads and they will help you to prepare your heart and soul for Christ's Mass.

Advent, however, consists of two themes. The first theme is our preparation for our Lord's Nativity. We might celebrate in groups or alone - it makes no difference. We might be involved in great acts of worship that are augmented by magnificent music, or we might, due to circumstances beyond our control, be on secular duty; perhaps in the police, the fire service, a patient or a member of staff in a hospital, or working on ships, planes or trains, maybe pumping fresh water to our taps or perhaps generating electricity - it makes no difference where we are or what we are doing, **we can all mark the birth of Jesus, the Christ.**

For the other theme of Advent, the End Time or the Second Coming of our Lord, and our 'Life Everlasting', let's turn, for a minute or two, to our three creeds.

At Evensong, in the Apostles' Creed, we say that we believe 'In the Resurrection of the body' .

At the Eucharist (in a few minutes' time), we say that 'We look for the Resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.'

And on the rare occasions that we say the Creed of St. Athanasius, we end with a very similar statement with regard to Life Everlasting.

These creeds are the Articles of our Faith, the blueprints of our Faith, and should be recited with absolute conviction. They make it clear that the body will continue to be a totally functioning organ in heaven as on earth. Many people in our day and age are troubled over the idea of the resurrection of the body. This problem is not unique to our time, and has existed from the earliest days of the Church, and St. Paul deals with it at some length in 1 Cor. Ch.15.

Anyone who likes to imagine his or her appearance in the after-life in terms of what they saw in the bathroom mirror this morning, is not in harmony, in tune, with the mind of the Church as expressed in the Bible or in the Creeds.

Just as, during this life, our physical bodies are constantly changing, shedding particles as dust so that over a life-time we are renewed, thus, although we are of real substance, real flesh and blood and really do exist, we are at all times heading for our end-time here, but ONLY here. Like a tree that spends possibly 100 years or more shedding its leaves in autumn and awakening in the spring, but eventually dies, we too finally complete our association with this body. This body is like the almost invisible poppy seed, which after undergoing disintegration in the earth, where it ceases to exist in a form recognizable as a seed, appears as an elegant plant with a long stalk and magnificent flaming red flowers. So it will be for our bodies at the End Time, the Second Coming. And however different in appearance, the relationship between our resurrection body and this natural body will be as obvious as that between the poppy and its seed. For just as the tiny poppy seed contains in itself, the elegant stem, the shapely leaves and the beautiful flower, so our temporal body already contains what it shall be when time for us shall cease to exist, cease to matter.

So what does Advent obligate us to? We are duty-bound to proclaim the sheer wonder of Christ's Nativity as ever new, ever fresh, ever amazing, and ever wonderous for the fact that it took place for us, here in our time. It is a new and incredibly a personal gift for each one of us.

It is also our duty at this Advent-tide to confront our own very real and very personal shortcomings. Our sins of omission and commission. We do this because we know that in due time HIS DUE TIME, we will have to give an account of our lives and actions. And we always, always, remember that we are saved by Grace, by God's gracious mercy and forgiveness. Left to our own

devices we would be damned, but Christ chose the Cross for His glory and our salvation.

So yes, worry about your shortcomings as you prepare for Christmas 2020, but also hold in your mind that Jesus said to His disciples, recorded for us by St. John, "Do not let your heart be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places. If it were NOT so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?"

And even on the Cross our Lord spoke of the life to come when, according to St. Luke, He said to the dying thief, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." He didn't say, "You might just scrape in because you defended me against your mates' sarcasm." No, Paradise was available, no rules, no conditions attached, to the thief. WHY? Because God **is** love and Jesus **IS** God, and He loves you with the same no-strings-attached love as He loved that thief and all humankind down through the ages.

I pray that you will all make a good Advent.

Amen

C.J.F. 29/11/20