

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT.
2022

Advent seems to fit the weather of this part of the world. No, the weather is not consistently bad, far from it. Suffering, after all, is not what Advent is about. Advent is about the end of the world as we know it, and the beginning of the New World, in which Human Nature shares in Divine Life, a sharing that begins in and with the person of Jesus Christ, true God and true Man.

We have had Spring, Summer, and Autumn. All were pleasant, Autumn remarkably so. They are gone now, and they needed to go. They had their time, but Life had to move on. Winter has come. One year has ended. A new year will soon begin.

Life in this world is like Spring, Summer and Autumn. There are storms in it, occasionally terrible storms (Life has its tornadoes, you might say), but it is basically good. Still, it does not fully satisfy. We look forward to something that does fully satisfy. We look forward to what the Prophet Isaiah describes as the Mountain of the Lord's House, where swords shall be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, and where men shall train for war no more. The night is advanced, says St. Paul, and the day is at hand. This world, in which good and evil are so confusingly and painfully intertwined, will end with the Coming of Jesus Christ, and that ending is a good thing. This Old Order will give way to the Kingdom of God, in which evil is simply no more.

All sane human beings (not all are sane) know that this world is no permanent home for us. We will die, and leave this world. What Christians know is that this world is part of our journey, our journey into Divine Life. Since we are pilgrims passing through this world, we do not, especially in Advent, seek to be physically comfortable in our prayers. A light touch of physical discomfort reminds us that we are pilgrims on a journey, who need to keep our attention fixed on our destination. We do not demand to pray on comfortable recliners, or even on well padded kneelers. We take delight in kneeling when we pray, because that posture reminds us of that day when we will appear alone before our Judge and Savior, the full truth of our lives being revealed to us. Kneeling as we think about our lives, may we not fool ourselves about our lives now, only to be horribly shocked on the Day of the Lord.

The harvest has been gathered in. The fields are bare. The leaves are gone from the trees, and the flowers from the gardens. Another year will come. In the interval between the end of one year and the beginning of another we hear the Prophet tell us to climb the Lord's Mountain, and we begin that climb humbly on our knees. We hear the Apostle tell us to wake from sleep, and so we don't recline. If not kneeling, we stand erect, ready to declare "blessed is He Who comes in the Name of the Lord". If not standing, we run towards the Lord, running by doing good deeds, as we prayed in this Sunday's Collect "Grant your faithful, we pray, Almighty God, the resolve 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 Kingdom"

To what end God may destine the other beings of this Creation, I do not know. I do know that God destines us to meet our Maker and Lord as He truly is, even as He shows us the full truth about ourselves. Perhaps the merely animal part of Creation, not intellectually knowing its Creator, is meant to live for a brief time and then die, made by Him, but not made for eternity. Perhaps. We human beings, however, are made for eternity. That means necessarily that we will encounter the Eternal as He truly is. One by one, in His Presence, we will look at Him, and He will look at us.

Both Testaments testify to this moment of Resurrection and Judgment. Job declares that “though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God” Our Lord Jesus Christ declares “And you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of The Power, and coming in the clouds of Heaven” St. Paul tells us “Now we see as through a glass darkly, but then face to face”

At that moment of Resurrection and Judgment, as we see the Lord, the Lord will see us through and through, and reveal to us the whole truth of our lives. “We shall all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, for it is written ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall acknowledge God. So then every one of us shall give an account to God” These words of St. Paul remind us that our moment of intimate encounter with God is also the moment of final truth for us.

That moment of intimate encounter may come upon us suddenly. The Lord Jesus explicitly warns us that “the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night”. We dare not wait until the end of this earthly life to prepare to meet the Lord, since we do not know when this earthly life will end.

What can we do to prepare for that day when we will meet the Lord as He truly is? Our entire being will be changed. What can we do to prepare for that tremendous change? The Sacred Scriptures tell us “Prepare to meet your God”; but how are we to prepare?

We can prepare for judgment by striving to obey the Lord’s commandments; but what awaits us is more than merely judgment. Our destiny is to appear before God and to share in divine life. We must prepare to be able to endure the Presence of the All Holy, a Presence that burns the unholy like a fire. No one can hope to run a marathon, or win a wrestling match against a fit opponent, unless he has prepared his body. No one can hope to endure the Presence of the All Holy unless he has prepared his soul.

Preparing to meet the All Holy is one of the essential reasons for religious worship. People sometimes grumble “Why do I have to go to church? Why do I need to participate in sacred rituals and ceremonies? Why do I need to pray, and fast, and meditate? Isn’t being fair, honest, reliable, and kind the worship God really wants?” Perhaps, if they recognize any need at all for religious worship, people might still grumble along these lines “All right, maybe I need worship, but why can’t I just make my own worship? Why do I need to come to church for worship? Why do I need to participate in these Rites the Church calls Sacraments? “

Well, the first reason is simply because God tells you to. The same God Who tells you to be fair and honest, also tells you to worship Him. The same God Who tells you to be reliable and kind also tells you to come to the Sacraments. The second reason is that one day your whole being will change. You will leave this earth and enter an entirely different state of being. Contact in this life with God through the Church's worship is a necessary preparation for that new state of being. The Sacraments, Baptism and the Holy Eucharist in particular, are necessary preparations for being able to endure the Presence of the All Holy God as he truly is.

The All Holy God has appointed Jesus Christ as Mediator between God and Man, but the Scriptures show us what happens when someone meets even the risen Lord Jesus Christ as He truly is without proper preparation. "When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead" (Revelation 1,17).

In His mercy, God gives us means of preparing to meet both His Christ, true God and true Man and the Mediator between God and Man, and, through Christ, the All Holy Trinity. Through the veil of the Sacraments, the Holy Eucharist in particular, Jesus Christ comes to us and, if we are attentive and cooperative, gradually prepares us to encounter Him as He truly is, when we come before Him as our Judge. Gradually, through the veil of the Sacraments, the Lord Jesus makes the Presence of God known to us, and thereby slowly gets us ready to encounter the All Holy without a veil.

When we come to this church for Divine Worship, we should come in the Spirit of preparing ourselves to see God as He truly is. We begin our worship with "I confess" in anticipation of that day when all our sins will be laid before us. Then, with trust in Him, we arise from our confession of sin to listen to the Lord Jesus' word, and then to receive His veiled, mystical, real Presence.

When we come to this church for Divine Worship, we should come with the intention of preparing to join the church of all the Angels and Saints, where all is purity and joy. We should come with the intention of preparing to endure the Presence of the All Holy, of getting ready for an experience both terrifying and wonderful, an experience that will consume those who are unready for it, but be the infinite delight of all who are ready for it. For that experience we will need courage, and courage to face a great event is built up by thinking about that event. We come to this church in part to think about that Day when we shall see God as He truly is. We come to this Church because, in Jesus Christ, God has already chosen us for Heaven, and mercifully gives us this church and its Divine Worship as a means of getting ready for Heaven. By sacred words of penance and of praise, by chanting Psalms and by singing hymns, we are getting ready for Heaven.

All forms of Divine Worship are means of getting ready for Heaven, but the Holy Eucharist is the best means of them all. In the Holy Eucharist the Savior, God incarnate in the Man Jesus Christ, is present to us in a real, though veiled form. The One Who will one day judge us, gets us ready for that judgment by becoming our Sacred Food. Our lips touch some Wine, but Faith

tells us we have been washed in the Blood of the Lamb. We make the Sign of the Cross on our bodies, as the Power of the Cross descends upon us. We look at the figure of the Crucifix over the Altar, as the Crucified and Risen One becomes present on the Altar. We eat some Bread, but Faith says that we have consumed the Flesh of the Lamb Once Slain, the Sacrifice of Eternal Life. In several ways, but above all through the Holy Eucharist, the Judge prepares us for the experience of meeting Him. He wants to make us unimaginably glorious, but knows that we must be made ready for glory. On earth, He gives us Divine Worship, especially the Holy Eucharist, to make us ready.

This Season of Advent invites us to come to receive the means of Grace, the means of preparation for the experience of meeting God as He is and entering into Divine Life. Just as Moses told the people of Israel to prepare themselves for God's revelation at Mount Sinai, so Advent tells us to prepare ourselves for His one on one revelation of Himself to us. With St. Paul in chapter 7 of Second Corinthians, Advent tells us to "cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit". Advent calls us to have serious thoughts for a while, accompanied by acts of penance and by deeds of charity. This is the season for remembering that we are pilgrims on this earth, and for remembering that we are called to share eternally in Divine Life. We know that we will one day die. In Advent we prepare for that day, through Divine Worship and Good Works. In our Divine Worship today, let us beseech the Lord and Savior to have mercy on us, to have mercy on our friends, to have mercy on our enemies, and to reward us eternally with heavenly glory.