

12.2.2018 Advent 1 (Romans 13:8, Matthew 21:1)

As we consider the Collect, Epistle, and Gospel readings appointed for this First Sunday in Advent, the common theme makes it very clear that we are at the beginning of a new Church year. In our Collect this morning we petitioned God for grace that we may “cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armor of light.” In our Epistle (Romans 13:8-14), St. Paul says, “... *that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep... The night is far spent, the day is at hand... put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ...*” And the words of the Gospel declare: There is a new King in Jerusalem, Jesus Christ. As our Lord triumphantly entered the city, “... *a very great multitude spread their garments in the way; others cut down branches from the trees, and strawed them in the way. And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest*” (Matthew 21:8-9).

A new year, a new beginning, a new King... This morning each one of us, in one way or another, must come to understand that “... *now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed*” (Romans 13:11). Can you hear the sense of urgency in the words of St. Paul? We must awake out of sleep. We must rid ourselves of imperfect and lukewarm Christianity; and seek the true, genuine Christian life. The life that is like a man whose eyes are open, and who, in every sense, is alert and ready to complete the task set before him.

It is “*high time*” for those who call themselves Christians to wake up, to be more like Christ, but on second thought, perhaps wording it that way sets the bar too low. On this first day of the New Year the words of St. Augustine sound much more appropriate, for he went well beyond exhorting people to be more like Christ when he said, “Let us rejoice then and give thanks that we have become not only Christians, but Christ Himself. Do you understand and grasp, brethren, God's grace toward us? Marvel and rejoice: we have become Christ...”

Now, that's a quote and resolution for the new Christian year! A resolution that, if we shared it with the world, would sound absolutely foolish (1 Corinthians 1:18), but why would we resolve to be anything less than Christ Himself, for we know that Christ is the head of His body, which is the Church (Colossians 1:18). He is the Head, and we are the members; He and we together are the whole man. In the same way that our head directs our body – guiding every function of each individual member – Christ and His Church are One as we strive to continue His redemptive and sanctifying work in the world.

The words of our Lord found in the Gospel according to St. John speak of this unity. He said, “*I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without Me ye can do nothing*” (John 15:5). A member of the human body can do nothing unless it is connected to the head. Our human body is one body because every member shares that common connection. If that connection is lost we lose the ability to feel, we lose the ability to move, and in the most severe cases

we lose a part of our body completely.

Jesus spoke of this truth when He said, *“If a man abide not in Me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned”* (John 15:6). Apart from the vine a branch is good for nothing, apart from the body an arm, a leg, or any other member is good for nothing, but when they are one, there is no limit to what they can accomplish. These words of Jesus are the key: *“...without Me ye can do nothing.”* We will never “understand and grasp” God’s grace toward us without Christ. We will never truly live apart from Him, for without Him we can do nothing.

So, we must learn how to recognize Him, and be certain He is at the center of everything we do (Colossians 3:23). Perhaps the most important lesson in Advent is how to recognize our Lord, and the appointed readings through this season are all about signs that point to Christ. In the coming weeks we will read about *“... signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars”* (Luke 21:25). We will hear of signs made manifest in the miraculous works of Jesus, *“The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them”* (Matthew 11:5). Finally, just before Christmas Day, we hear from John the Baptist, *“the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord”* (John 1:23).

This is all yet to come, but today we begin the season of Advent with this sign: The triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. Matthew tells us, *“All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon a donkey, and a colt the foal of a donkey”* (21:4-5). How are we to recognize Jesus? In the coming weeks it won’t be difficult to recognize Him as Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the conquering King of the New Jerusalem, for we will hear accounts of indescribable miracles, and prophecies of *“men’s hearts failing them for fear”* (Luke 21:26) as the Son of Man is seen coming in a cloud with power and great glory, but that’s not how we recognize Him today. In our lesson today, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords comes to us riding on a donkey.

As He entered Jerusalem, our Lord came in humility. He was not crowned as King for all to see, yet many of the people there hailed Him as the Son of David who came in the Name of the Lord. They used the word *“Hosanna”* to confess the truth that here was the Messiah, the Son of God, who came to save His people from their sins. Their recognition of Him could only be by the grace of God. It was a miracle, because our Lord came in such a state of humility. He did not reveal His full glory as God in human flesh. He did not exercise His majestic power to its greatest extent. He appeared in so many ways to be an ordinary man. He came to His own in the most common, humble way.

Our Savior is no longer in this state of humility. He now fully exercises His power and glory throughout the universe, but still He comes to us in these humble ways. He comes to us riding a donkey. Do we recognize Him? It can be difficult *“for man looks at the*

*outward appearance*" (1 Samuel 16:7). We look at the donkey and fail to see our Lord. Our arrogant, sinful flesh doesn't want to recognize Him when He comes this way. We want to look for Him in other, more glorious places. So we come to the House of God on Sunday morning and look for Him in full regalia, in polished brass, in the finest linens, or in the pageantry of a procession, but what did Jesus say about those who overlooked His real presence in *"the least of these"* (Matthew 25:40)?

He said, *"I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not"* (Matthew 25:42-43). These are the words of our Lord to those who failed to see Him in the needs of their neighbor. These people may have worshiped God in formal worship services, but they had not worshiped Him, or recognized Him, in their daily life.

The Lord comes to us daily in the least of these our brethren. He comes to us riding on a donkey, and even here in His house on Sunday morning He still chooses to come to us in the most common, humble way. Our Savior is here today, humble and lowly to our eyes, in bread and wine, His precious Body and Blood. Again, He chooses humility. He doesn't choose luxury, decadence, or status. We do not indulge in champagne and caviar, but something as common and ordinary as bread and wine, yet by the grace of God and the power of His Holy Spirit, just as the crowd recognized Him all those years ago, we recognize Him today, and we receive Him in these common elements.

*"Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek..."* (Matthew 21:5). Our King came riding into Jerusalem in humility. Our King came to be crowned with thorns. He came to be mocked, to be treated shamefully, and then executed as a criminal. He came to suffer, die, conquer death, and rise to new life; that He may offer His precious gift of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life to all who recognize Him. May we be those *"on His right hand"* (Matthew 25:33-34), who recognize Him every day in these most humble ways, may we by faith receive Him today, and may we by the grace of God *"rejoice then and give thanks that we have become not only Christians, but Christ Himself"*.