

11.29.2020 First Sunday in Advent

When we consider the Collect, Epistle, and Gospel readings appointed for this First Sunday in Advent, the common theme in the words we prayed and read this morning 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, 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...*” (Romans 13:8-14). And the words of the Gospel declare: There is a new King in Jerusalem, Our Savior 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 every 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.*” 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’s like a person whose eyes are open wide, and who, in every sense, is alert and ready to run the race set before them.

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”. He is the Head of His Body (the Church), and we are the members; He and we together are the whole person (Colossians 1:18). 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 Jesus found in the Gospel according to St. John speak of this unity. He said, *“I am the vine, you are the branches: He that abides in Me, and I in him, the same brings forth much fruit: for without Me you 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 said, *“If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered...”* (John 15:6a). Apart from the vine a branch is good for nothing, apart from the body an arm, a leg, and every other member is good for nothing, but when they are one, or when we are one in Christ, in Him, with Him, and through Him there is no limit to what we 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 live the way we should without Christ. Apart from Him we can do nothing.

So, we better learn how to recognize Him, and be certain He is at the center of everything we do (Colossians 3:23). 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. As we journey through this season we’ll read about *“signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars”* (Luke 21:25). We’ll read about signs made manifest in the miraculous works of Jesus, in which *“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’ll hear from John the Baptist, *“the voice of one crying in the*

wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord” (John 1:23).

Our journey through Advent begins today with the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and this sign: St. Matthew tells us, “*All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, Tell the daughter of Zion, Behold, your King is coming to you, meek, and sitting on a donkey...*” (21:4-5). If the most important lesson of Advent is how to recognize our Lord, then the obvious question this morning is how do we recognize Him? In the coming weeks it won’t be difficult to see 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 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. Today, in His triumphal entry, He comes to us riding on a donkey.

As He entered Jerusalem, He 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 was only by the grace of God, it was a miracle, because Christ came in a state of humiliation. He did not reveal His full glory as the One True God in human flesh. He didn’t exercise His majestic power to its greatest extent. He appeared to be an ordinary man. He came in a lowly way.

Our Savior is no longer in this state of humiliation. He now fully exercises His power and glory throughout the universe, but still He comes to us in these lowly ways. You could say... He comes to us riding a donkey, and I wonder, do we recognize Him? It is very difficult because “*man looks at the outward appearance*” (1 Samuel 16:7). We look at the donkey and we’re not convinced. Our sinful flesh doesn’t want to recognize the Lord when He comes this way. We want to look for Him in other, more glorious places. So we come to His house on Sunday morning and look for Him in full regalia, in polished brass, in the finest linens, or in the pageantry of a procession; yet our Lord reminds us again of the truth we heard last Sunday.

"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 did not see Him in the humble needs of those around them. These are His words to those had failed to seek God's will as to what their neighbors needed from them. They had, perhaps, worshiped God in church on Sunday morning, but they hadn't worshiped Him, they hadn't even recognized Him, in their daily lives.

Our 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 Body and His Blood. Again, He chooses humility. He doesn't choose luxury, decadence, or status. We don't indulge in champagne and caviar, but in 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 miraculously recognized Him all those years ago, we recognize Him today, and by faith we receive Him, His Body and His Blood in these common elements.

"Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek..."

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 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".