

1st Sunday of Advent

Collect:

ALMIGHTY God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal, through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, now and ever. Amen.

Epistle: Romans 13:8-14

OWE no man anything, but to love one another: for he, that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbor: therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now, is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent; the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk honestly, as in the day, not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof

Gospel: Matthew 21:1-13

WHEN they drew nigh unto Jerusalem, and were come to Bethphage, unto the mount of Olives, then sent Jesus two disciples, saying unto them, Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them, and bring them unto me. And if any man say ought unto you, ye shall say, The Lord hath need of them; and straightway he will send them. 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 an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass. And the disciples went, and did as Jesus commanded them, and brought the ass, and the colt, and put on them their clothes, and they set him thereon. And 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. And when he had come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, Who is this? And the multitude said, This is Jesus the prophet of Nazareth of Galilee. And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the money-changers, and the seats of them that sold doves, and said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.

Introduction

One thing about me is that I have always loved the game of football. As a young boy living in Pocatello, I would watch any kind of football on tv and often engage in parking lot or street games. Most of the time our local affiliate would televise the Denver Broncos, and in the days of John Elway, it was a fun team to root for. Over the years, I have maintained my devotion to the team and spent a few Sundays enjoying the games, maybe with a little too much excitement. Over the years, I have learned to calm my rabid fan focus a little bit, but I still find myself getting fired up and even a little anxious when I watch them play.

A couple of weeks ago, I came home from church and turned on the tv to see if, by some miracle, they were going to televise the Bronco game. They usually do not, so I was forced to check the score every now and then on my cell phone. The past several years has been dismal, and this game was not a pretty site. It was the end of the third quarter, and they were playing the New York Giants. Denver had not scored a point all game and were down by 19 points. Seeing this debacle, I was glad I was not watching it. Dismayed I found something else to do not checking again for a while. When I clicked on the score a second time, I saw that they had managed to get a touchdown and a 2-point conversion. What happened next was nothing short of amazing. Both teams traded touchdowns and then Denver started to get hot, scoring twice in less than 2 minutes, taking the lead. Unfortunately, with

only 39 seconds left in the game, the Giants managed to score again. It seemed like a wonderful comeback attempt was going to fall short. Denver had to go the length of the field and score an unlikely field goal in extraordinarily little time. I started to feel a little anxious and I nervously refreshed the score constantly in the next few minutes. Unbelievably, they completed a few long passes and with 2 seconds left, they scored a field goal, winning by one point. I was excited that they had won the game but disappointed I was not able to watch all of that unfold; it would have been exciting but nerve wracking.

A few days later, while my wife was out at her book club, I saw that the NFL network was rebroadcasting the game. I clicked on it and interestingly joined at the start of the fourth quarter. The situation again looked bleak and many in the crowd were leaving the game. However, I had a unique perspective. I knew how this game was going to end. No anxiety, no worry, just a calm reassurance that despite the incredible odds against them, somehow, some way, they were going to end up victorious. I harbored no doubt watching the game, as I knew what was going to be the end result. Normally I would have been a nervous wreck, but secure in the knowledge of how it unfolded gave me a quiet confidence.

As we enter into the season of Advent, we too can rest assured and live our life without anxiety, stress or worry, because we know what Jesus taught us and the promise He gave.

“God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten son to the end that all who believe in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16)

The Advent season is a four-week period in the Christian calendar that prepares people for Jesus Christ’s birth at Christmas, while also pointing ahead to His promised return. Each Sunday of the season traditionally spotlights one of the key themes of hope, peace, joy, and love to invite reflection, prayer, and expectant celebration. The season highlights the tension between the "already" (Christ has come) and the "not yet" (Christ will return). Because the "not yet" is imminent, we must live fully in the "already." The key idea here is the certainty that *Christ will come again*, a truth we repeat in our liturgies, creeds and worship. We must prepare ourselves for this, and we are fortunate to have a wonderful blueprint outlined by the Apostle Paul in our Epistle from this morning.

Body

(Romans 13:8-14)

“Owe no man anything, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.”

In our Epistle this morning, Paul is talking to the people of Rome. His first statement is about love and our debt to one another. We all have debt; it is hard to get through life without having some form of it. We live in a society obsessed with debt, mortgages, student loans, credit cards and car loans. However, Paul starts by naming the only debt we should worry about, and it is not money. True Christian

living is defined by the perpetual state of owing and paying love to our neighbor, because this debt is the only thing that truly prepares us for Christ's return.

Paul continues by quoting five of the Ten Commandments, concerning murder, adultery, theft, false witness, and coveting. He argues that all of these "Thou shalt nots" are summarized in the command, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Of all the texts that can bring clarity, our church father, Augustine, thinks that the interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees in Matthew 22 is the most important, because it shows us how Jesus himself interpreted Scripture. The passage begins with the Pharisees testing Jesus by asking him, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus responds to them: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Mt 22:36–40). Augustine defends the idea that these two commandments should serve as our lens for interpreting Scripture by appealing to Christ's statement that "all the law and the prophets" hangs on them (Mt 22:40). This reveals that Christ measures His own interpretation of every passage by whether or not it produces love of God and love of neighbor. Augustine argues that we should follow Christ by interpreting Scripture in the same way. We will know that our interpretation of a passage is acceptable when this interpretation prompts

us to have a deeper love for God and neighbor. If it does not, then we must be misinterpreting the passage. “So, anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them,” Augustine says, “but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them.” From Augustine’s perspective, this method corresponds with Paul’s description of “faith working through love” (Gal 5:6). We read Scripture through the lens of our faith in Christ when we interpret it in light of God’s love. This way of reading accords with the eternal life we will have in Christ as we stand before the Father in love.¹

The Law tells us where the boundaries are; Love tells us why the boundaries exist. If I genuinely love my neighbor, I do not need a law telling me not to steal from them, murder them, or cheat them. Love preempts the need for the Law. The Old Covenant gives us a checklist of things *not* to do. The New Covenant that Jesus brought to the world calls us to a dynamic, continuous action to love one another. Love is not a passive feeling; it is the active desire for the good of the other person, even if we do not know them. In verse ten Paul states, “*Love worketh no ill to his neighbor: therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*” (v.10)

¹ Keith L. Johnson, [*Theology as Discipleship*](#) (InterVarsity Press Academic, 2015), 113–114.

Paul then shifts gears in his narrative. In verse 11-13 he speaks of an urgency, knowing and being cognizant of the time, and our need to wake up and realize our salvation is closer than we may think it is.

“And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now, is our salvation nearer than when we believed.

The night is far spent; the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk honestly, as in the day, not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof” (Rom. 13:11-13).

Paul is referring to “sleep” in a spiritual sense. Spiritually asleep is our complacency, distraction, moral apathy, or becoming entirely consumed by worldly concerns. Paul is telling us to focus on what is righteous and good, and to walk honestly in life, not being misguided by all the distractions of the flesh. The coming of Christ is compared to the dawn. When light approaches, we shed the clothing and behavior of the night. Paul lists the “works of darkness”: partying, drunkenness, promiscuity, jealousy, strife and quarreling. These are behaviors rooted in self-interest and a rejection of the debt of love. They are a rejection of Christ’s love for us.

In the last line of our Epistle, we get the direct command: "*But put on the Lord Jesus Christ.*" This is the core instruction. We do not just put on new habits; we put on a new identity, a new mindset and focus on living. Our new behavior is meant to reflect the character of Christ. When we live as Christ, our daily decisions and actions are acts of love for God, through our love for our neighbors. We are called to stop planning our lives around self-gratification and start planning them around the self-giving nature of Christ.

Action

The beginning of the church year and the season of Advent is a time for reflection, preparation and action. The urgency of Christ's return means we must stop spiritually sleeping. Today we should ask ourselves what garment of darkness are you still wearing? What areas of your life are driven by self-provision rather than the debt of love? Are you loving your neighbor, showing mercy and forgiveness, as God has done for you?

Conclusion

Fr. Chris discussed last week that "Church is serious business" and we need to focus on what the liturgy and God's word tells us. We have no time for idle waste or lack of focus for we do not know when our Lord will return. "*Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come*" (Matt 24:42)

We may not know the day or the hour of our Lord's return, but for those who love and whose faith works through love, we can rest in quiet confidence. Like watching a football game where the outcome is revealed, we have the blessed assurance of knowing how the story ends. However, while there is assurance of God's promises, we are still called to actively fulfill the law of love and obey His commandments. Advent is a great reminder that we need to self-assess and determine how we are living our life and where we can do better.

From our collect for today:

“ALMIGHTY God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal”

I urge you to go forth this week, not focused on paying off your financial debts and dwelling in earthly concerns, but committed to paying forward the debt of love, for the night is passing and the day is at hand.

To the only wise God our Savior, *be* glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.