

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Let me begin this morning with a reminder about the scriptural framework we'll be using throughout the Advent season. On Advent I, the theme is the Second Coming. Both Advent II and III focus on the preaching and ministry of John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah. And on Advent IV, we have the annunciation of the Nativity.

Our passage for this morning was originally a Palm Sunday text but has been transferred to Advent; it consists of several component parts: a saying about the coming of the Son of Man; three illustrative sayings; an exhortation to watchfulness; a fourth illustrative saying; and an exhortation to readiness.

Within this overall plan, Matthew addresses Christology (i.e., the extent of the divinity of Jesus), eschatology (the time of the return of the Son of Man remains indefinite; and discipleship (Jesus' followers should prepare themselves for the Second Coming).

Of the three illustrations, the first concerns the story of Noah in Genesis, but here there is no judgment passed on what the people were doing in advance of the Flood (they were simply doing ordinary human things). I mention this because in 2 Peter, it is reported that God "brought a flood on a world of the ungodly." The purpose of the story is simply to suggest the sudden and unexpected qualities of the return of the Son of Man. Then there are two sayings about men and women doing normal tasks. When the Son of Man returns, the judgment is that one will be taken and one will be left behind.

This is not a decision made on the basis of the appropriateness of the tasks they are engaged in. Rather, the outcome is based solely on the judgement of Christ. Then there is the nocturnal burglar breaking into a house, and the purpose here is to foster watchfulness. Jesus's disciples are not to be like the homeowner who is caught unawares.

For a somewhat enlightening perspective on this Second Coming theme, let's consider for a moment how the passage would have been read and received by the audience listening to an oral rendition. Today, many Christians are frightened by apocalyptic passages in which people either suddenly disappear or remain behind (in fact, we have current TV shows that build their entire premise on unexpected departures of neighbors, children and friends), or they simply don't regard these parts of scripture as being necessary to faith.

But at the time they were written, the purpose was to provide hope, not to scare those left behind in the wake of the Ascension of the Messiah. In this sense, we can see how indispensable this image

would have been to the followers of Jesus. This man whose ministry they were very familiar with, whose words had once entranced and comforted them, whose presence as friend and healer had filled their lives with hope ---- that man was gone, taken from them, and they would have been disconsolate had they no promise of his return. This should be a continuing communal hope among Christians. We need to recall that we were created for more than fear; we live in the promise that God will always be with and for us.

Thus, in a sense, this explanation also helps us understand why on Advent I, we read a passage on the return of Jesus when we recognize that we are primarily looking forward to Christmas in Advent; *that wonderful story, however, is incomplete* without reference to the *Parousia* or Second Coming. The risen Jesus instructs the church to continue its witness until he returns. Another reason for inclusion of these passages in the gospel accounts could be that the followers of Jesus were beginning to lose confidence in the coming of the kingdom without some reassurance to bolster their testimony.

You are probably aware that there are branches of Christianity which find in passages like the one we're reading today evidence of what they call "the rapture." The passage we're taking up this morning is one which is "commonly abused by the *rapture*-ists." The particular outlook we find here is called premillennialism and it only dates from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It would have been unknown and unrecognizable in the first century. But Matthew's account like others in the New Testament does not contain detailed information on the scenarios that will accompany the return of Christ. Particularly in Advent, one can see how people might be encouraged to look for "signs" of the Second Coming by the focus in today's text on *watchfulness* and *preparedness*.

But understand that the language used here is figurative and is not meant to be heard as factually true; to read it otherwise is either to invent something that isn't there or simply to allow fear to overwhelm us when the purpose of the apocalyptic works is actually to provide hope. Furthermore, the passage itself alerts the reader or hearer to the fact that *only God* knows the specifics of the *Parousia*. It is presumptuous in the extreme to conjure up images that are not true to the text itself.

It is more helpful, I think, to try to imagine the world in which Matthew and his community lived and to see those circumstances as being reflected in the writing.

He, like the other gospel writers, believed "that the present world, involving as it does sin and sickness and death, would come to an end soon." When Jesus returned everyone would be allotted space in one of two groups: the "*blessed*" and the "*cursed*."

And he believed it would happen soon, before the generation of which he was a part had passed away. Yet, it did not happen as expected, and this created difficulties for the followers of Jesus. In

fact, one could argue that Matthew's community had become resigned to the fact that Jesus was not returning as soon as hoped --- they had become "inured to delay," and may therefore have needed to be re-charged by the kind of message we find in chapter 24 of Matthew's gospel. Belief that the end of this age was near was "in the air" in the first century, and it was breathed in not only by Christians but by earlier Jewish writers as well as some from outside of Israel.

The fact that we cannot revive this way of thinking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should not prevent us from trying to reconstruct that mindset in order to understand the literature of the period.

It can also be helpful to recall that when Christ entered Jerusalem, he did so to go to his death, and this was the purpose of reading this passage on Palm Sunday. But now in the *parousia* "he is returning to reassert his cosmic claims to power." It is this "restoration of the creation" under Christ's lordship which was celebrated on Christ the King Sunday last week on the final Sunday after Pentecost. Today's New Testament reading is a natural follow-up to that idea.

As the days grow shorter and darkness increases, we light Advent candles each week "to remind us that we do not face the darkness alone but that, indeed, the light of the world has come, shining on in the darkness to illumine our lives and lead us forth not in fear but courage and even joy."

Amen.

#### Sources:

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