

New Year's Resolutions

Mark 13:24-37
November 30, 2008

I.

I wonder if we came to church this morning expecting to celebrate new year's day. Well, that's what today is according to the church calendar. The church year begins with the First Sunday in Advent, which raises an interesting question. If today is new year's day in the church, should we be thinking about some spiritual new year's resolutions? Today's Gospel suggests that it might be a good idea.

And we begin our new year by doing something that might seem unusual. Our liturgy during the next four weeks starts at the end and works backwards. Instead of celebrating Christ's birth, which we will do later next month, we begin with Christ's second coming at the end of history. And we are warned that we do not know when it will occur, and must keep awake and be ready.

Why do we do this? Why in the beginning have we peeked at the ending? We just spent the last three weeks of the last church year hearing about final judgment through stories of the ten bridesmaids, the three slaves, and the sheep and the goats. Why do we begin the new year still talking about end times? You might think we would have the general idea by now.

The answer is we do it to emphasize that the sure and certain reality of God's kingdom at the end of days is implicit in Christ's birth at the beginning. And we also do it with joy, not fear. In First Thessalonians Paul told us that "God did not appoint us to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:9). God wants us to hear the words of today's Gospel not as a threat, but as words of hope that carry an eternal promise.

So, we see that Jesus is the link between two great ages. We live in a time of already, but not yet. God's kingdom began to appear on earth with Jesus' first coming as a baby, it is partially here now through the church Jesus left behind, and will fully be here with his second coming as the Son of Man, in the clouds, with great power and glory.

II.

In thinking about Jesus' birth and his coming again during Advent, I recall story of some monks who lived at a monastery deep in the woods away from civilization. Their rule of life was enforced by a rigid vow of silence. Silence could be broken only once a year, only on the first Sunday in Advent, and then by only one monk, who was allowed to speak only one sentence.

Well, on the first Sunday in Advent a few years ago it was Brother Thomas' turn to speak, and he rose and said, "It means so much to me to recognize Christ's birth during Advent," and he sat down. Total silence ensued for the next 365 days. Then on the first Sunday in Advent the following year, Brother Michael got his turn and said, "I am so moved during Advent by thinking about Christ's coming again," and sat down. Again, there was silence for an entire year. Then, on the next first Sunday in Advent, Brother Paul rose and said, "I am fed up with this constant bickering!"

The truth, however, is that there is no need for argument. These two ideas about Advent are not inconsistent. One naturally follows from the other. The coming of God's kingdom in clouds with glory completes what began in the manger with humility.

And the reality of God's kingdom is a familiar part of our liturgy. In the collect at the beginning of this service, we asked that "in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to life immortal."

And as soon as I finish here we will say the Nicene Creed and reaffirm that “he will come again in glory to judge the [quick] [living] and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.”

Shortly after that we will celebrate the Eucharist and [at the 10:00 service] we will proclaim in unison that “we remember his death, we proclaim his resurrection, and we await his coming again in glory.”

III.

Let’s look at today’s reading. Jesus had been preparing his disciples for the challenges they would face after he was gone. Then he moved forward to the end of history and told them how the glorious kingdom would be fulfilled.

And he used apocalyptic and symbolic language similar to the description of end times in the Book of Revelation. He spoke of the signs of the end of the age, and said that people will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” And he said no one knows when it will occur, not even himself.

Then he said people should watch, be ready, and keep awake. And I don’t think he was talking about trying to fight off sleep. He wasn’t referring to No Doz or coffee or caffeine pills. Rather, he was talking about putting God first, and doing things that might be included in those spiritual new year’s resolutions I mentioned earlier.

IV.

But what does this all mean now? What difference does it make whether the second coming is about to happen, or is centuries away? Would we live differently in one case than in the other? Does the prospect of the future second coming actually affect our lives today?

Here’s an example to think about. Remember when we were in school and the teacher said “I’m leaving the room and I’m not sure when I’ll be back. But if I come back and find anyone out of their seat, they’ll go to the principal’s office.” Sound familiar?

And then what happened as time passed and the teacher didn’t return? Didn’t we get restless? Weren’t we tempted to misbehave as more time passed and the teacher still was away?

But there is a big difference between being in school then, and living in the world now. If we actually got away with something before the teacher got back, there was a good chance that we would be home free, so to speak.

Is the same thing true now? Do we think that if Jesus is out of the room he will not know what we do? Do we think that all this end times stuff is somewhere out in the distant future and we will never see it, so we shouldn’t worry a lot about it?

Well, one of the things we learned in school is that the teacher always did come back. In the same way, today’s Gospel proclaims the certainty of Jesus’ return and calls us to be ready.

But being ready does not mean being on the lookout, watching for Jesus to come back to the room, like we might have watched for our teachers so we could get back into our seats. Instead, we are called to be ready all the time in the way we live our lives.

It also means that it’s not like watching in the rear view mirror for a state trooper when we are speeding so we don’t get caught. Instead, it means watching our own driving so we don’t have to worry about whether the trooper is there or not.

And, as I said earlier, we are not called to be ready out of fear, but with a sense of assurance. We should not anticipate impending doom, but know the sure and certain hope of our salvation. This is not rocket science or complicated theology. We all can do it if we make the effort.

That effort, however, is to be directed toward a spiritual rather than physical readiness. We are called to go to church rather than the gym for this purpose. To be ready in this sense means living our lives by faith through the Holy Spirit to anticipate Jesus' arrival. We can do that in several ways that could be parts of the spiritual new year's resolutions we might consider.

For example, can be ready to get rid of patterns in our lives that are destructive, addictive, or that indulge our pride or vanity. Each of us, in some way or another, wrestles with those demons. Pride usually is a standard confession for me every time I prepare to share in the Eucharist.

And we can be ready to act on opportunities to extend ourselves to others. Human need is everywhere, both here in the church and in the community, and the need can be material, physical, spiritual, or something else. There always is work to be done to help other people.

We also can be ready to confront and withstand temptation. You know I am not one of those people who believes that Satan is merely a symbol of the evils of human nature. Satan is a real spiritual being and is intent on separating us from God. And we cannot oppose Satan and win. He is too strong. All we can do is just turn away and turn toward Christ as our source of strength.

Finally, we can be ready to know the truth, which is an elusive commodity in today's society where morality can be relative, ethics can be situational, and the basic question can be whether or not something works. We can become dangerously comfortable with a Christianity that is ready for the holiday cheer of Christmas, but not ready for something as serious as the second coming.

And the world out there will not help us. The world often gets in the way. Our hope is here, in the church, in community with each other. Our ministries enable us to help and comfort ourselves, as well as others. Our emphasis on Scripture, both in worship and education, supports knowing God's truth. And I would like to see us form more support groups, prayer groups, and accountability partners to help with things in our lives we want to change.

V.

And so, here we are. God's kingdom is a work in progress. The Prince of Peace already has come, but God's peace at the end of history is not yet here. The incomplete revelation of God's kingdom that we have today competes with a world still broken by sin and disobedience. And that world will not be fixed until the words of today's Gospel reading come to pass.

Therein lies our challenge. We are called by God to find ways to live in the meantime, in between times. We are called to live Christian lives in the midst of this contemporary world of pressures, temptations, and distractions.

As we conclude this Thanksgiving weekend, I would leave you with the story of the priest at a gas station, waiting in line before a long holiday weekend to fill up his car. When he got out to wash his windows one of the cashiers who was a member of the priest's church saw him and came outside and said, "I'm sorry about the delay Father, it seems that everyone waits until the last minute to get ready for a long trip." The priest chuckled and said, "I know what you mean. It's the same in my business."

I pray that we don't wait until the last minute to watch and be prepared, and that we can live in ways that always make us ready for his coming again. As we start our new year here at St. Thomas, perhaps we can adopt some of those spiritual new year's resolutions to help us along the way. *Amen.*