

## ***Already But Not Yet***

Mark 13:24-37

November 27, 2011

### **I.**

Christmas is coming, isn't it? Black Friday is over, and nothing stands in the way of the inevitable rush to get ready. A well known song of the season tells us that "Santa Claus is coming to town. He's making a list, checking it twice, gonna find out who's naughty and nice." It then continues, "He knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake!"

Perhaps the composers of those lyrics were appealing to the basically good nature of children, and emphasizing an incentive to behave. But it is not far from the Bible either. Do we wonder if Scripture influenced this clever little tune?

Our Gospel today tells us that Santa is not the only one on the way. Jesus also is coming to town. And for the last three weeks we heard that Jesus also had his list, and he also knew who was naughty and nice. There were some sobering readings about Judgment Day.

Remember the ten bridesmaids and the five who ran short of oil. Then there were the three servants whose master gave them money to care for and one of them failed. And finally last week we heard about Jesus at the end of the age separating the sheep from the goats.

But the similarities end there. We know Santa Claus always comes on December 25, but Jesus said no one knows the time of his return. And tradition holds that the worst Santa would do to someone naughty would be to give them a lump of coal. The Bible tells us, however, that for nonbelievers that lump of coal might be giving off some heat.

### **II.**

Today is the First Sunday of Advent. It is new year's day in the church. We rang out the old church year last week with the end of Pentecost, and we ring in the new church year today with the beginning of a new season that lasts four weeks until Christmas eve. It might even be time for some spiritual new year's resolutions.

And we start in an unexpected way. We might think we're here to celebrate Christ's birth, which we will do soon. But today's Gospel reading speaks to us of Christ's second coming at the end of history, and we are warned to be ever-vigilant because it could happen at any time.

Secular society doesn't even recognize Advent. How many cards will you receive this time of year that show Jesus as a humble babe in the manger? Probably several. But how many cards will you get showing Jesus coming again in glory? I have seen a few, but not many. And has there ever been an Advent sale at the mall?

So why do we do this today? Why in the beginning of the story have we peeked at the ending? 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 do so with joy, not fear. In First Thessalonians Paul told us, "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.

And that hope and promise is the only way. I ask you, how does the world think it will ever have peace, prosperity, and justice for all people, everywhere, no exceptions? No wars. No poverty. No hunger. Surely we don't think that humanity, on its own, can do it. History clearly shows that self-interest always trumps common interest when they are in conflict.

So, how else would such a golden age arrive? Do we think that genetic engineering can eliminate our selfish human instincts. Or maybe scientific breakthroughs will make us love one another. Perhaps aliens from outer space will threaten us and force us to come together. Not likely.

Here is the truth. The only way that good can completely and eternally triumph over evil is when Jesus Christ comes again to establish God's kingdom. There is no other way. Please tell me if you can think of one. And so we hope for this to occur, and we live in faith that it will.

But for now, Jesus is the link between these two great ages. It is a time of already, but not yet. The Prince of Peace already has come, but God's peace at the end of history is not yet here. The world still is broken by sin and disobedience, and 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 a way to go forward in the world in the meantime, in between times. We are called to have faith and live Christian lives in the midst of contemporary pressures, temptations, and distractions.

### **III.**

This distinction between the beginning of God's kingdom with Jesus' birth, and its completion when he comes again, might be illustrated by a story.

A group of monks lived at a monastery 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.

On the first Sunday in Advent a few years ago Brother Thomas rose and said, "It means so much to anticipate Christ's birth on this day," and sat down. Silence ensued for the next 365 days. Then, on the first Sunday in Advent the following year Brother Michael spoke of the other meaning and said, "I am moved during Advent by thinking of Christ's coming again," and sat down.

What happened next? Again, there was silence an entire year. Then, on the next first Sunday in Advent, it was Brother Paul's turn and he said, "I am fed up with this constant bickering!"

They probably weren't Episcopalians, were they? We never bicker. 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 with glory completes and fulfills 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 prayed, "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, "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."

So let's go to the beginning and quickly review 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. 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." And he said no one knows when it will occur, not even himself.

Then he said people should watch, be ready, keep awake. And he was not 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 our Lord first, and living as though we will see him in those clouds tomorrow.

#### **IV.**

But do we really think that way? 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?

We cannot avoid the inevitable. Jesus' instructions to the people of that time apply to us. We are called to watch and be prepared. But our watchfulness should not be marked by fear or speculation, but by a sense of assurance.

And for what do we watch? Well, we are not on the lookout, watching for Jesus, so we can sound the alarm or get busy quick. It is not like watching in the rear view mirror for a state trooper when we are speeding so we don't get caught; rather it is watching our own driving so we don't have to worry about whether the trooper is there or not.

This involves spiritual rather than physical readiness. Today's Gospel tells us to go to church as well as to the gym. And here are some things we might consider as we keep ready for that inevitable day. They might be some of those spiritual new year's resolutions I mentioned earlier.

For example, we can resolve 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 regular confession for me.

And we can resolve to extend ourselves to others. Human need is everywhere, both here in the church and in the community. There always is work to be done to help other people.

We also can resolve to confront temptation and seek forgiveness if we fail. I have said before that Satan is not just a symbol, but rather a real spiritual being intent on separating us from God. And we cannot oppose Satan. 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 God's 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. The truth, however, as I have said before, is revealed in Scripture and does not change to suit our own purposes. God's truth is not based upon our own wishful thinking.

#### **V.**

So, here we are. God's kingdom is a work in progress. The incomplete revelation of God's kingdom that we have today anticipates the glory to come later.

Today's Gospel reminds me of the priest at a gas station, waiting before a long holiday weekend to fill up. He got out to stretch, and one of the cashiers saw him and came out and said, "I'm sorry about the delay Father, it seems 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. And as we start our new year here at St. Thomas, perhaps we can reflect on those spiritual new year's resolutions to guide us along the way. *Amen.*