Come, Lord Jesus!

November 27th, 2016

Advent 1

On Friday night, my wife was kind enough to cook me a Thanksgiving dinner. I was working late Thursday, so it had to be on Friday. It was a nice surprise to come home to. And since I do not care for turkey, I get to eat roasted chicken alongside the green beans, potatoes, and of course stuffing. For me the stuffing and green beans have always been the main course. Like many households, after dinner we discussed the things we were thankful for. The children were thankful for cats, for food, for a roof over their heads. My wife said she was thankful for hugs. At last, it was my turn, and my wife asked me what I was thankful for. To the surprise of everyone, I said: "I am thankful for the Second Coming of Jesus." And that is true. More and more each day, I am thankful that Jesus is coming again. Christ is indeed coming! Advent is here, a new year in the church calendar dawns. For many Advent is a time to prepare for Christmas. Liturgically and theologically, Advent is a time when we look forward to the coming of Jesus. And Jesus is coming! It is a sad fact that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ has become something of a source of confusion today. It is often spoken of with mocking incredulity, doubt, or fear and dismay. Almost a hundred years ago, William Butler Yeats wrote a rather dark poem called "The Second Coming":

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;

Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out

When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*

Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert

A shape with lion body and the head of a man,

A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,

Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it

Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

The darkness drops again; but now I know

That twenty centuries of stony sleep

Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,

Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?

As you can see, this poem is not really about Jesus coming again. It is about the birth of the anti-Christ or some other such dreadful figure who is going to unleash havoc on the world. Even Christian representations of the Second Coming have not always been positive. In *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, as I may have mentioned before, Ivan tells the story of The Grand Inquisitor. One day, Jesus returns; he comes again and arrives in Spain during the height of the Inquisition. At first people greet him happily; he heals and blesses people as he walks down the street. And then the Inquisition arrests him and sentences him to be burnt at the stake for interfering with the work of the Church. The Grand Inquisitor comes to visit Jesus in the prison cell. The Grand Inquisitor speaks of why Jesus is no longer needed; he speaks of all that Jesus has done wrong and all that the Church has done right without Him. At the end, Jesus says nothing, but merely kisses the Inquisitor. Because of this, the Grand Inquisitor releases Jesus, who disappears into the dark alleys of the night.

One of the greatest obstacles to the spread of the Gospel in our time is a fear of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. What would happen if we really threw open the doors of our hearts and allowed Jesus to come? What would happen if we really lived in deep expectation of the imminent return of Christ and the fullness of the kingdom of heaven? What would that look like in our lives? When we speak of the Second Coming, are we afraid that things will fall apart? Are we afraid of looking like idiots? Are we afraid that perhaps the Jesus that comes again will not be the Jesus we were waiting for? Will the Second Coming interfere with us? I am thankful for the Second Coming because I want to see Jesus. I want to see my God face to face and to know what it feels like to have a lifelong hope fulfilled. I want to know the face of hope, peace, joy, and love. I want to cry out, like Thomas, and say: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). I do not pretend to know when the end of the end times is. I am not really interested in dates and guesses. Nobody knows the hour, after all. I just want to finish the race and see my Lord.

Advent is not just a season; it is also a spiritual discipline, in a sense. It reminds us of the virtues that help us open ourselves to the grace of God, and it encourages us to cultivate those virtues. Every virtue we can name relates to some characteristic of God. Hope is an expectation of goodness from God. The author of Hebrews says, "Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). To be hopeful is to be positive—to expect good things on the horizon. It is easy to sink into darkness, to let the dark clouds obscure our vision, but hope gives us clarity, it enables us to see the goodness of God in the signs of the times—those road markings, way posts, signs and graces by which we sense God's presence and work along the way of our spiritual and earthly pilgrimage—those moments that remind us that our ultimate destination is good (Romans 8). Without hope, we would miss the clues we need to get through our days, the guidance we depend on to strike out into new directions, the calm that comes from a hopeful prospect, strengthening us for our service to one another. Hope is precious in so many ways. In the past, I have also spoken of hope as waiting. God teaches us to wait so that we can know something about his eternal patience—the deep, boundless reservoirs of patience with which he creates and redeems. To have hope is to stretch ourselves towards God, to reach out to him through time and space. There is another aspect of hope, however—one that is quite relevant to our lives today. Paul speaks of it in his letter to the Romans, which we read from earlier: "Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand" (Romans 13:11-12).

To have hope is to be awake and to know that salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. As far as I know, Jesus did not return again while Paul was alive, and the world did not end, either. And the Kingdom did not come in its fullness. What, then, does Paul mean? Every day you live, you live more and more in Christ. Salvation works contrary to entropy or decay. Whereas the batteries of our universe are slowly (very slowly) running down, just as our mortal bodies are slowly wearing down, our souls are only gaining in energy and strength from the Lord. Jesus said: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21). In other words, whereas the earthly things that we put our hope in—safety, security, pleasure, good stewardship of finances, even the environment—can let us down, can tarnish, rust, crumble, and rot—the word of life in us grows. The presence of God can only grow if we let it. Salvation is the very opposite of entropy and decay. Salvation is growth. And if we plant things in our gardens and expect to see a good harvest, knowing all the while that there is no guarantee that is the case, how much more should we look forward in hope to something guaranteed by Jesus, who is the same yesterday, today and forever?

The hour has come for you to wake from your sleep. Paul is speaking to our spiritual somnambulance, or sleepwalking, our zombification that prevents us from living life in the fullest. Living without hope is a sure way to fall asleep, to retreat from reality. In Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Midaq Alley*, one of the characters chastises the others for complaining about their boredom; he tells them that as long as God is there, we can never be bored—there is always something to do, as long as we are awake and grateful for what God has provided. There is an infinite number of ways to praise God and hope in God if only we got around to it. I remember on road trips as a child—I would hate to fall asleep for fear that I would miss something—some landmark or beautiful landscape. Even on airplanes, I confess, I still have this habit. I may take a short nap, but I am always worried that I will not see something. Most of the time, this is kind of an absurd type of vigilance, but this summer it actually paid off. On the way back from Japan to Hong Kong, I got to get a breath-taking look at the nightscapes of Taipei and Taichung from above. Through the airplane window, I could see buildings, streets, countless city lights, cars driving on highways. They were miniature but beautiful in their distance, and I felt a strong sense of longing for the island I had not seen in so many years and my friends who live there, but the vision still gave me an indescribable gratitude and hope. The world is beautiful—not because it is a thing in itself, but because it is itself a journey through time to something better. The only thing we should fear is missing out on chances to realize what God is doing; chances to see God at work; chances to give thanks to God for all that he provides day by day. That is what it means to be awake.

Paul says, "The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality or sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Romans 13:12-14). The works of darkness are the works of selfishness; the works that close up our hearts and place a barrier between us and God. It is absurd, Paul seems to reason, that having tasted salvation and the light of Christ, we would live as if we had no hope, drowning ourselves in distractions, clinging to worldly pleasures and goods, instead of building our hope by being vigilant and eager for the return of our Lord. Hope is also an expression of love. Only a few verses before our reading today, Paul says: "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet, and any other commandments, are summed up in this word; 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' Love does not wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:8-10). It is difficult to love others when we are busy with our selfish desires, when we are asleep instead of awake. And it is difficult to hope without love just as it is difficult to love without hope. Through hoping in God, our love deepens, it acquires new meaning, it expands our souls to receive more of his wisdom and patience, more of his Holy Spirit, more of his enduring love and grace.

Without Christ, we only knew bondage, the fear of death, the dread of spiritual death; we knew that sin imprisons us in ourselves and makes us slaves to desires we can never fulfill. Without Christ, we were sad. Now that we are free, why do we crawl back into ourselves, why do we hide as if we were not free? This Advent, let us meditate on the Jesus who is coming. The Jesus who can come into our hearts in this life. The Jesus who is coming again to redeem our bodies and souls. As Paul says in Romans 8: "For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved" (Romans 8:22-24). The Lord called Lazarus to come forth from the grave (John 11); the Lord calls all of us to come forth, to be unbound, to strip off the grave clothes and really live. And to live with the hope that we will see Jesus someday and find rest in the happiness of seeing and embracing our best friend, our wonderful Saviour, God with us and for us, our Emmanuel.