

*Sermon for 1 Advent, Year B
by Fr. Garrin W. Dickinson
Holy Nativity, Plano
30 November, 2008*

Happy New Year!

Today is the first day of our year. The first Sunday of Advent. Last week we celebrated our triumphant king, Jesus, and his final rule over all. This week, we return to the beginning, and wait expectantly for Jesus to come to us.

We usually think of Advent as the season of preparation for Christmas. And it is. We prepare to receive the child Christ in our celebration of his Incarnation and birth. And that is altogether good and right and proper. But if that were all it was, Advent would be a quaint, precious, and saccharine exercise for those who find such things emotionally compelling. This is why we so often find a sort of Victorian simpering quality in discussions of Advent and Christmas. There is something too safe about the baby in the manger, if we allow him to remain just a baby in a manger.

The fact is that this waiting for the appearance of the Christ child cannot be separated from our waiting on Christ generally. And, in that, we are very little different from the Old Testament faithful. We must deal with the totality of who God is. The prophet Isaiah looks back to the stories of God's presence in the Torah, when the mountains shook at the presence of the Lord. He knows that God's coming is something that is frightening in its power. God's presence is like fire, and if we come into it, we must be prepared to burn and boil away. And yet Isaiah says, "O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down"!

The prophet sees all around him that the Holy People of God are not holy. "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment." Even the good that we do is not good the way God is good. Our sin is like an infection that corrupts and destroys the whole body. We are like leaves that have ceased to receive life from the tree. And so we will dry up and wither, and we will be at the mercy of our sins, which will blow us away like the winter wind.

Isaiah also sees that there is no one left who even wants to overcome all of this. The only one who has the power to help in this situation is God. But “there is no one that calls upon thy name, that bestirs himself to take hold of thee”. Our forefather Jacob grasped and wrestled with God, because he knew that without God’s blessing, he was lost. But there is no one left in Israel who will do that. And in his frustration, Isaiah realizes that even that is because God has willed it for some mysterious reason. “For thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast delivered us into the hand of our iniquities.”

And so Isaiah cries out to God on behalf of his people. He longs for God’s frightening and refining presence, because he knows that ultimately, God’s presence, no matter how difficult it is to face, is vastly superior to God’s absence, where we are left to our own puny devices in the winter gales of our sin. God is one “who works for those who wait for him.” “Yet, O Lord, thou art our Father; we are the clay, and thou art our potter; we are all the work of thy hand.” And so, longingly, we wait for you to turn back the fire of your presence upon us. Make us endure you, so that we may “remember thee in thy ways”, and joyfully work righteousness, and be saved.

The New Testament gives us more information about how God “works for those who wait for him.” Jesus’ gift of himself for us is truly awesome. It is difficult to even comprehend it in its fullness. But in this matter of waiting, it only changes our situation slightly.

St. Paul writes his first letter to the Corinthians precisely *because* he has heard report of unholy activity in the Corinthian church. And yet, he begins by characterizing them as “those [made holy] in Christ Jesus, called to be [holy ones] together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”. And here we are again. Just like the ancient Israelites, we are made holy, and we are called to become holy.

But St. Paul puts it right back in the same context that Isaiah put it. “I give thanks to God always for you, because of the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus ... as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ”. We still wait for Jesus to reveal himself in power, just as Isaiah waited. And we know that he will, because he has promised to do it. “And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels, and gather his chosen from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”

But there is also another waiting, which is for something more immediate. We know that, in Christ, God has already given us grace. And we know that he is already working in us. That is why St. Paul gives thanks. “God is faithful,” he says, “by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.” And God in Christ “will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” And so we wait; not only for some far off day, when the sun and moon are extinguished, and the stars fall, and the heavens are shaken; but we also wait for God’s burning presence to reveal itself in us, as Christ sustains us, and purifies us, and makes us finally guiltless.

This immediacy is what our Lord is talking about when he changes the word on us. Jesus does not tell us simply to *wait* for God to do something. He says, “Watch.” “Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come.” Watching is what we do when we are waiting for something to happen any moment. Watching is waiting eagerly and expectantly. Watching is making sure that everything is in order, or at least as much as we can make it so.

The child we wait for, the baby in the manger, is also the man who beyond hope won for us the victory over death and sin. The child we wait for is also the eternal second person of the Holy Trinity. He is the awesome presence of God, having miraculously taken on human form. He is the frightening, burning presence of God right among the tinder and kindling of our own miserable souls. And yet the most terrifying thing of all should be to think that he might come and find me asleep rather than watching for him. That he might find me ignoring his presence in my life and unprepared to meet him at all. That he might find me a withered leaf on the tree, ripe for the winter winds.

And so we gird ourselves and stand before the terrible presence of the Almighty God to pray the collect for this day, understanding the appalling audacity of our request: 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, one God, now and for ever. Amen.