

“AWAKE – again the Gospel-trump is blown – / From year to year it swells with louder tone, / From year to year the signs of wrath / Are gathering round the Judge’s path, / Strange words fulfill’d, and mighty works achiev’d, / And truth in all the world both hated and believ’d.”¹

These are the words of a poem written by John Keble, an English priest of the 19th century in his collection of poetry called “the Christian Year”. More specifically, this poem was written for “Advent Sunday” – which happens to be today (or perhaps tomorrow). It actually is the first poem in the book, as the First Sunday in Advent is the beginning of a new Christian Year. Over the thirteen stanzas of the poem, Keble explains why the reader might need to “awake”. The second stanza repeats, “awake!... up from your beds of sloth,” and then he begins to explain how complacency has taken hold of Christians through the ages. Jesus died on the cross, salvation was won, and the Church began to sleep. Slowly complacency wears away at the energy and the love and the knowledge of Salvation. *“Where shall the holy Cross find rest? On a crown’d monarch’s mailed breast...”*

It’s a rather bleak view of things, written from the perspective of the Church of England in the early 1800’s. Even then, 200 years ago, there was grave concern that the Church had fallen asleep and forgotten it’s course and purpose. “Awake – again the Gospel-trump is blown”.

Why this call to “awake”, then? We’re just getting to the darkest time of the year, with the shortest days with the least amount of sunlight – it’s so much easier to sleep! What can possibly be so important to wake us up now? According to Keble’s poem, we have to wake up because “the Gospel-trump” is being blown, and “from year to year it swells with louder tone”! This is the trumpet of the Gospel, the trumpet which heralds in Christ’s second coming; for, as we read in Revelation, *“Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever’”* (Rev. 11:15). St. Paul also speaks of this trumpet in his own writings and references it in today’s Epistle. See, what we are caught staring at is this double-meaning of Advent.² The word, “Advent”, itself means *coming*. We call it this because it is the preparation we make for the commemoration of our Lord’s incarnation – his coming in the flesh to suffer for us. This season prepares our hearts and minds to recall that most wonderful thing – that God became man in Jesus at his nativity. But, in addition to this previous earthly coming, we await eagerly his *second* coming to *us* when he will be the judge of the whole world, both the quick and the dead.

This dual nature of the season is caught in both of our lessons today. In the Gospel, we hear of Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem on what we now call Palm Sunday. The people of Israel had been told by the prophets of a descendant of the line of David who would deliver them from their troubles and usher in a new kingship. Specifically, here in Matthew’s account of the Entry into Jerusalem, he quotes the prophet Zechariah, *“Behold your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden”* (Zech. 9:9). This entry into Jerusalem made known to people that the Messiah had arrived – it fulfilled a prophecy about his first coming. And, it *also* looks forward to his death, which we know is coming based on our liturgical use of this story at the beginning of Holy Week. While the Gospel reminds us of the prophecy of his first coming, I believe the Old Testament lesson serves of a prophecy for his Second, and the Epistle is a reminder of that. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus himself tells us that he will come again to judge the world: one example is in Matthew 16:27, “For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.” The prophet Micah describes something like this: the day of the Lord when he shall come to judge the world. This idea of “coming again” should not be a foreign concept, though often enough it is forgotten! If you are one who forgot about this, have no fear, however, because less than 100 years after Jesus’ death, Christians were already forgetting – or were ignoring – the second coming of Christ.

St. Paul reminds the Churches who received his letters about this on more than one occasion. While the first Christians knew to expect Jesus to come again, it did not take long for complacency

¹ John Keble, “Advent Sunday” in *The Christian Year* (1827).

² This paragraph makes reference to Benjamin Harrison, “Tract 16: Advent”, *Tracts for the Times* (1833).

and apathy to set in. Who knew when the second coming would be? Would it be in 5 years, or 5,000? Nobody had the answer then, and we still don't have the answer now. "But, be ready!", St. Paul says. Specifically, in today's Epistle, he says, "knowing the time... it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand" (Rom. 13:12). Be ready. Why? Because Jesus told us to be ready. *"Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect"* (Matt 24:42-44).

St. Paul tells us that in order to be ready, we are to love our neighbours as ourselves in fulfillment of the law, to embrace and "put on" the Lord Jesus Christ, and to prepare ourselves spiritually, not of the flesh. He tells the Romans to "cast off the works of darkness, and... put on the armour of light" (Rom. 13:12) so that they are prepared for the day of the Lord. So, too, we must "cast away all evil works, and clothe ourselves in all good works, before it is too late: and the very purpose of the season of Advent is, to remind us that it will soon be too late."³ In a sermon he wrote on this lesson and the collect, Keble draws attention to this language of "casting off" and how intense that is. He did not say "put down", but instead "cast away" in all its forcefulness. Imagine a poisonous spider, or snake, or whatever creepy crawly thing you can't deal with: if you suddenly found one on your arm, wouldn't you shake and jump to throw it away from you as far as you could? This is what St. Paul is telling the Romans to do: throw it away, and in its place armour yourself with Christ.

We don the armour of light because we are in a state of constant spiritual warfare against the forces of darkness. Keble writes, *"Now what this Christian clothing, or armour of light is, we know from other places of Holy writ. There is "the shield of faith," entire belief in the great things out of sight. There is "the helmet of salvation," hope, that through Christ we may be saved, on our true repentance and dutiful obedience. There is the "breastplate of love" and true charity, to guard our hearts from evil and selfish desires. There is "the sword of the Spirit, that is, the Word of God;" His holy commandments, deeply fixed in our heart, and always ready for our use, that by the remembrance of them we may put away proud, unkind, impure, foolish imaginations. This is the armour of light: these are the portions of a Christian man's armour, which lie, as it were, by his bedside, when he awakes in the morning, and which Christ expects him to put on, as he would his clothing, to prepare himself for the duties of the day. How is he to put it all on? By good thoughts and good resolutions; considering beforehand what he will have to do that day; what temptations he is likely to meet with, and how he may best prepare against them. And this cannot be, without earnest prayer; therefore the Christian warrior will be very punctual and very attentive in his morning prayers."*⁴ This is what we will pray for every single day through Advent in our Collect. That, in this time where we are to focus on Jesus' coming again, that we may cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of life. We pray that we might be properly woken up, and not be caught sleeping, or with our pants down, when our Saviour Christ comes again. Like a new diet or a new workout routine, we like to put things off to a more convenient time – but we can't do that with our Spiritual health. We need to embrace Jesus before it is too late, because it will soon be too late. We don't know when, but it will happen. Wake up and do it! That's the call for this Advent season, and truly for the rest of our time as well!

In Keble's poem that I started this homily with, it ends with imagery of people who have not woken up and do not heed the call to wake up: *"But what are heaven's alarms to hearts that cower / In wilful slumber, deepening every hour, / That draw their curtains closer round, / The nearer swells the trumpet's sound?"* We want to be ready when He comes. We must be ready when he comes. So let us take this Advent season, which comes 'round every year, to focus in on that hope we have for new life in Christ, that he will come again to set the world right-side-up instead of the upside-down we keep finding ourselves in. Let us be ready for that day, and until then, let us *cast away the works of darkness and put on the armour of light. Amen.*

³ John Keble, "Sermon XXIV: The Advent Collects I. The Warning Call", *Sermons for the Christian Year: Advent to Christmas Eve* (London: Walter Smith, 1887).

⁴ Ibid.