

“My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.”
(St. Matthew 21.13)

Welcome to the great season of Advent. It is one of the two great times of preparation in the Church calendar – the other being Lent. Each of them is what the Church considers to be a season of penitence, a season to come to terms with and repent for our sins. This is why we wear the colour purple as we do in Lent. It is symbolic of our grief, our sorrow, for the things we have done against God because we are sorry for them. It is said that the colour also represents the violet flower, which “bows its head and is a symbol of humility”. Purple also resembles the colour of the sky just before sunrise – symbolic of Christ’s arrival in Advent, and the ushering of the new kingdom through Lent. We also relate purple to royalty because of the great expense required to produce it in ancient times. Purple dye was harvested from sea snails and required a lot of work for a little yield. Thus, only the rich and royal could afford it. We read in the Acts of the Apostles that Lydia from Thyatira supported St. Paul’s missionary work by making and selling this dye (Acts 16.14-15). This symbolism extends then to our anticipation for the arrival of our King, Jesus, through this season of Advent. We wear the colour of royalty and penance to await the coming of our divine king.

It is a season of expectation, and our Gospel lesson for today sets that scene for us. We are presented with the familiar story of Jesus arriving in Jerusalem on a donkey to the cheers of a great multitude. This is the same story we will hear on Palm Sunday, but tied here as it is to the cleansing of the temple, it tells us something particular for the Advent season. The theme of the season is revealed in the quote Jesus makes from the prophet Zechariah, “Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee” (Zech. 9:9). While directly he is quoting this because he will be riding on a donkey, indirectly he is saying the words to all who read: “Behold, thy king cometh unto thee”. This warning, or perhaps this announcement, that the kingdom of heaven is at hand serves as a reminder to *expect* the king to be arriving. This expectation results in *preparation*, and that is what we are called to do this Advent. We expect the arrival of our king, and this causes “every heart to make him room”, to quote a Christmas carol.

It is probably reasonable to say that the people of Jerusalem were *expecting* the arrival of the Messiah, but perhaps were not necessarily *prepared*. For those who had been hearing the whispers of Jesus going through the countryside healing and casting away demons, they were probably expecting for him to make a triumphal entry into Jerusalem but did not know how to prepare for what they were to receive. But anybody who knew the prophets well knew that Jerusalem would be the focus of the Messiah, in whatever form he took. We can see this in our Old Testament lesson, a prophecy from Micah.

The prophets often referred to the salvation of Jerusalem. We see this from a variety of them for a few reasons. First, some of the prophets were speaking in the time of the exile in Babylon, where all the inhabitants of Judah and the city Jerusalem, were held in captivity and in constant hope of being returned to their land. In this case, the salvation of Jerusalem was symbolic of their own return from exile and the ability to go back home. Second, the salvation of Jerusalem was a requirement of the Messiah to establish the throne of David, to restore the temple to its glory, and fulfill the promise that God made to David that his heir would sit on his throne forever. Jerusalem was the city of God, for it contained God’s house – the Temple – and was the centre of the undivided (and later the divided) kingdom. Jerusalem had intense cultural and religious reasons to be the centre of salvation for the Messiah, and the New Testament picks up on this too, where St. John’s revelation shows him the completed salvation of Jerusalem, featuring the new city that has been fortified by the might of God. So, to read the prophet Micah describing the Judgement of the Lord as the salvation of Jerusalem just makes sense in this theme.

But the Salvation of Jerusalem as prophesied in the Old Testament *does* find its fulfillment in Jesus. It just turns out it didn’t happen quite the way people expected during Jesus’ lifetime. Jesus himself prophesies that the Son of Man will return in the Gospels, and at this return he will judge the earth and fulfill all the prophecies. When this is will be is uncertain (Mark 13.32), but it *will* happen.

When he does, this is when the vision of Revelation will come true, this is when all the prophets will be fulfilled. This is when Zion shall be restored, and when “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Micah 4.3). Like we have been reading in the Old Testament lessons for the last few weeks, this is when the radical peace of God will become known to his creation: when the Lord comes again in judgement to rule the earth. This expectation is what points us, along with the words of Jesus, to this second coming, the triumphant return of the Son of God. In reading these prophecies, we can clearly see that they have not yet come true, and it gives us hope to keep looking towards the future to wait for Christ to come again. We know what Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem at the first coming looked like, so we know that the second coming is where we must look to fulfill the prophecies.

But what does it mean for us to prepare for the second coming? What does it mean to anticipate the return of the Lord? We get some clues from the Gospel when Jesus cleanses the temple: for he casts out all the things within that distract from the worship of Almighty God. So, too, are we called to cast away all the things that distract us from the worship of the Lord, and we affirm this call in the collect we will repeat every day until Christmas Eve: “give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness and put upon us the armour of light.”

These words echo the message from St. Paul to the Romans in today’s Epistle. In this lesson, Paul reminds the Romans of the law in the form of the latter half of the Ten Commandments and summarizes them by saying “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself”, echoing both Deuteronomy and Our Lord’s words to say that love is the fulfillment of the law. He encourages the Romans to wake up, to pay attention, because “our salvation [is] nearer than when we believed”. He uses the imagery of light and darkness, of day and night, to draw comparison between the Godly way and the errant way of the flesh. Paul encourages the Romans, and in turn, all who read it, to embrace the light – to embrace God. Cast away the distractions of this world and turn our focus entirely on God, for he is the true light and “the day is at hand”. We don’t know when the day will arrive, but we all need to be ready, for we don’t want to be caught in a spotlight doing something we know we shouldn’t be doing. We don’t want Jesus to return and cast out the tables we have set up in the way of worshipping Almighty God.

Advent is a season of hard truths, yes, but we need to be faced with the hard realities of our sin and brokenness in order to live into the hope of Jesus Christ. For Jesus did not come to the world to heal the healthy and deliver the rich. He came to the world to care for those on the margins, those who knew they were unworthy to be in his presence. For us to be able to live into the hope of Advent – the hope of our eternal Salvation – we need to first humble ourselves before almighty God. We need to come to him honestly acknowledging our unworthiness, so that he may show mercy on us and that we may be prepared to welcome his judgement. This is why Advent is simultaneously a season of penitence as much as it is a season of hope. Our hope lies in our ability to first humble ourselves before God, to acknowledge that he is greater than us, that he is the creator and redeemer of the world.

Ours is not a religion that assumes we don’t make mistakes or endure hardship, instead ours is a faith that our God loves all those who come to him and ask forgiveness. We see this through Christ’s parables. Where other ‘gods’ place hefty demands upon their followers, it only leads to a place of bondage. Our God loves his creation so much that he came into it himself to save it from itself. The only demand He has is that we love him, love each other, and acknowledge our shortcomings freely. The reward? Eternal salvation. It’s really such a small price to pay.

So, while the world is already celebrating their understanding of Christmas, without the preparation of Advent, it misses a crucial point: why did Jesus have to come in the first place? And why does he say he’s coming again? The answer to both is to save us from our sins, to save us from the destruction of a life apart from Him. So then, while we prepare to welcome the joy of Christmas and the miracle of the Incarnation, let us first prepare ourselves to meet Christ again so that we are not caught in the darkness but rather are prepared to receive him wearing the armour of light.

To all of you, I wish you a thoughtful and prayerful Advent, and may we share in the ancient prayer: “*Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus, come soon.*”

Amen.