

*Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee.*

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*The end is near! Jesus is coming soon!* I am sure we have heard this before. We have seen it on billboards, church signs, and the random cardboard posters along the road. They have even made their way into comics and cartoons, and it is easy for us to ignore the warning. Yet the major theme of Advent is *Jesus is coming soon, prepare to meet Him*. During Advent we prepare to receive the Grace of Christmas, and we prepare for Jesus' second coming in power and glory at the end of the world. Advent is a season of preparation, but it is a season that challenges us because it stands in stark contrast to the secular Christmas season. In our culture Advent is so eclipsed by the secular holiday season that Advent is nearly forgotten. What I like to call the Hallmark Christmas has become so embedded in us that the way we celebrate Advent almost seems wrong. Yet the Church invites us to journey through Advent seriously and soberly reminding us of those virtues of Faith, Hope, Joy and Love which we need to receive from Jesus in order to meet Him.

For this reason, the lessons for this first Sunday in Advent are striking. We have heard this morning's Gospel and some of us might be wondering why we heard about Palm Sunday. We may think this Gospel is out of place for the First Sunday in advent, but this passage is a good illustration of Jesus' return. We know from the Gospels that Jesus had been to Jerusalem many times and that He returns to Jerusalem on this occasion riding on a Donkey, a symbol of humility. We are told *all of this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee*. We know what happens next, the people line the way to the city gate and sing and shout *Hosanna in the Highest! Blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord!* The crowd waves palm branches and those gathered throw down their coats and capes onto the road before Him. And we think for a moment Jerusalem finally 'gets it', that she finally understands who Jesus is. Perhaps, we think, Jesus finally receives the praise and glory He so truly deserves. But we read on a little further and we are struck by the fact that the ancient citizens of Jerusalem were not prepared at all to receive their king. Their worship and homage was not from their faith in Jesus.

Jesus enters into the city and it is asked, *who is this?* And the multitude replies, *this is Jesus the prophet of Nazareth!* Jesus the prophet of Nazareth. They do not say, *He is the Christ*, or *He is the Messiah* but rather insist that He is a great and holy man, a prophet, or one from the caste of religious men whom Israel had killed and persecuted. One would think that to enter into Jerusalem with such fanfare from this approving crowd would have qualified Jesus, at least, as a prophet or leader. The reactions of the crowd on that day certainly did grab the attention of the Temple priests and leading Pharisees. They worried that the crowd would take Jesus straight from the donkey to a throne.

Yet Jesus goes straight from the donkey to the Temple, to His own Temple, and not to an earthly throne. *Tell ye the daughter of Sion, behold, thy King cometh unto thee.* The daughter of Sion was not prepared to receive her King. Jesus has business to deal with long before He will take any throne. So he jumps off his donkey and heads straight for the Temple. The Temple was the heart of all Israel, it was the crown Jewel of Jerusalem. Life for the devout centered on the Temple. And yet the Temple had been corrupted, devout prayer and true worship had been monetized, materialism had taken root, and the daily sacrifice had been discovered to be a profitable enterprise indeed. The Temple officials had not heeded Jesus' warnings, they had not prepared themselves for His arrival, they were incapable of grasping who He really was, and at His coming the Temple officials were judged. We do not often think of these two episodes together, the entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the excitement of the crowd, and then the overthrow of the money changers in the Temple. But Jesus goes straight from the donkey to overturning tables and condemning sin. We see now what happens if we do not prepare ourselves to meet Jesus when He comes, and it shatters the 'warm and fuzzy Jesus' we like so much. The Jesus who comes will indeed be our king, but not before He has stirred up our faith, not before He has come to cleanse and purge the temple of our hearts of all sin and evil business. The Jesus who comes to us cannot be our Lord and King before He has made us ready for all that He is and means to do with our souls.

Jesus intends to startle us, shake us, overturn the tables of our false commerce and evil ways, and to awaken us to His coming. St. Paul intends to do the same thing this morning. He exhorts us to know the time that now 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: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light.* For St. Paul, Jesus is always coming. The end is indeed near. Our time on earth is short. Jesus comes to give us a chance to repent now or pay for our spiritual slumber and sleep later when Christ will come again for the very last time. St. Paul was always preparing to meet the Lord. He was so stirred up and moved by it that he was always making urgent preparation for it and urging all others to do the same. For St. Paul, Jesus was coming soon or Paul would beat Him to it by giving his life as a Martyr. In either case, St. Paul was always conscious of his imminent encounter with Christ who is always coming to us.

The urgency which moved St. Paul to get the message out that the Lord is returning soon, is always true. We are told not to listen to those false prophets who think they can tell you the day or the hour, because we have been in the End Times since Jesus ascended. We are closer today to the return of Jesus than we were yesterday. The end is near, so let us prepare to meet Jesus. How should we prepare though? St. Paul tells us to prepare by *casting off the works of darkness, walking honestly, not in rioting, not in drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife*

*and envy, we must make no provision to fulfill the fleshly impulses and sin. We are told to cast off the works of darkness so that we do not find ourselves cast out of God's presence like the money changers in the Temple.*

What a commentary this is on our secular culture, where Materialism has already taken over the Christmas season. The stores are filled with nearly everything imaginable, even images of Jesus in the manger. Perhaps the average person knows that Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus. But does he really understand it? Is the secular Christmas season our world's Palm Sunday moment where it seems finally the whole world has gone after Christ and will give Him the long-overdue worship and glory He deserves, only to ask, again, "*who is this? Who is this Jesus?*" May God prepare our hearts this Advent season to find Jesus in the stable at Bethlehem, to greet Him when He comes again in glory and power, and that we be not distracted by the materialism and distractions of our world. Amen.