

Advent I – Zech. 14. 4-9; Lk. 21.25-31

This is the beginning of the New Year, and in its beginning we celebrate our beginning in the arrival of our Lord Jesus Christ. But it is not simply his coming as an infant that we remember in this season of Advent. His appearance by natural human birth, to the Virgin Mary, witnessed by shepherds and angels has a season all to itself. But Advent is equally concerned with the exalted Christ's coming to judge the world in truth and equity. For we say in the Nicene Creed, "And he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; Whose kingdom shall have no end." So there is some confusion of focus in Advent, this season of Christ's coming in to the world, notwithstanding the confusion of focus that Christmas shopping contributes. What kind of story do we tell by beginning at the end? How is it that we make a successful start to the year by looking to the end of age? We begin at the end by faith. For the letter to the Hebrews says, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." And what is the object of that faith? The letter continues, "Let us look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." We begin at the end by faith. Jesus

reigns as king, having won the victory upon the cross. It is because the Christian places his hope in the exalted king Jesus that he looks forward to his second coming.

But if my theme is the Christian's hope in the return of the glorified Son, we may be puzzled by the readings appointed for this day. Indeed, on any day these readings are some of the most puzzling in Scripture. I am reminded of Mark Twain when he quipped, "Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture they do not understand, but the passages that bother me are those I do understand." Twain may not have suffered much anxiety about our readings today, but they have excited much attention in literature and media. One of the best selling books in the '70s was Hal Lindsey's "Late Great Plate Earth", followed by Tim Lahaye's blockbuster Left Behind series in the late 90's. Cinema has not ignored the fear factor, producing movies like "The 7<sup>th</sup> Seal" and "The End of Days". Hope, the Christian kind or otherwise, is in scarce supply in so many of these.

But I suggest to you that our passages from the prophet Zechariah and the Gospel According to Luke are not like these modern curiosities. Instead they are grounded firmly in the ancient Jewish faith. For the Jew believed in one

God who had made himself known on Mount Sinai. And the Jew believed in election, for God had called the Israelites to himself as a special people and had given them his Word after he had brought them out of the land of Egypt. And the Jew hoped in victory at the end of time, when the one true God would rescue his one true people from all their enemies. So Zechariah promised the Jews that one day there would come a king who would renew the covenant that they had broken. God would forgive them their sins, and the king would lead them back from exile in foreign lands into the Promised Land. The king would defeat their enemies and they would have peace. But Zechariah looked and saw the people like sheep without a shepherd. Worse than that, the shepherds that they did have, the priests and prophets, were false shepherds, leading the people away from their God. Zechariah then prophesied that a king would come who was the son of the great king David, and he would be like God and he would die at the hands of his own people. They would look upon him that they had pierced, and they would mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a first-born. Yet, in the midst of this apparent failure a fountain of blessing and forgiveness will spring forth for Jerusalem. So Zechariah concludes his prophecy in our passage this morning. God himself would come among his people and fight for them. But the conclusion of

Zechariah's prophecy, which we did not read, may not be the one we expected. With all the wars and rumors of wars mentioned by the prophet we might have expected one last great battle concluding with the defeat of God's enemies and the exaltation of the Israelites. While this is certainly included, what we find emphasized is that when God saves his people all the nations of the earth will come to worship the true God.

Likewise, our Gospel lesson from Luke is replete with doom and foreboding until we consider the context of Jesus' words. Jesus and his disciples are meditating upon the beauty of the Temple in Jerusalem. While Luke makes no reference to their specific location, the parallel passages in Matthew and Mark place them on the Mount of Olives, the very place Zechariah says the Lord would come to establish his kingdom. When the disciples marveled at the Temple, Jesus responded that the days were coming when the Temple would be torn down. The disciples respond, "Teacher, when will this happen and what will be the sign?" Jesus told them that they would be persecuted, that Jerusalem would be surrounded by pagan armies, and that the sun, moon and stars would give signs, and that they would see the Son of Man coming in a cloud in glory. So, he concludes, "When you see these things take place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all has taken place."

Here is great hope and comfort dear friends! The disciples were wondering what was to shortly take place and Jesus confirmed to them the glorious prophecy of Zechariah. There would be great persecution and sorrow, the pagan rulers of the world, like the sun moon and stars, would quake in the skies and the rule of Yahweh would begin when Jesus died upon the cross and rose again. The power of the great enemies of sin, the world and the devil were forever broken. God himself was in their midst and forgiveness of sins would flow out to all nations. The end of the age was not the end of the physical world, but the end of the age of the tyranny of sin and the beginning of the Kingdom of God and of his son, Jesus. Even as John says, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.”

Therefore, dear friends, because it is most certainly true that Jesus Christ is now King of kings and Lord of Lords, we as Christians should rejoice in this season of Advent, for it is not one of fear and foreboding but of victory and celebration. For it is the wicked who cry out for the mountains to fall upon them so that they may hide from the Lord’s face. But this is not the cry of the Christian. No, my friends, the Christian has said from the earliest days,

Maranatha, Come quickly, Lord Jesus! Do not misunderstand me; we must cast away the works of darkness from us, so that we may greet him with pure hearts. Winston Churchill overstated his case when he said, "I am prepared to meet my Maker. Whether my Maker is prepared for the great ordeal of meeting me is another matter." We may not come before him having lived our lives in drunkenness and wicked living. We should fear the day of his appearing if we have passed our time fighting our Christian brothers and sisters, accusing them and tearing them down. But instead seek out the weak and the broken hearted. Let us live our lives today as though we are with him even now.

This is the difficulty we find in this season of Advent, getting the last things first, so to speak. We tend to talk about and think about heaven in terms of some thing, or some place, that will happen at the end of time. This world will be old and bad and worn out, and Jesus will return just in time to save his faithful ones from destruction and whisk them away just before this world falls apart at the seams. Inevitably, the conclusion is that this world is bad, the world to come is good, and we should do little to prolong this one as we desire the arrival of the next.

But I don't believe that this takes seriously the message of the Old Testament or of the New Testament for that matter. The God who created

the world, is the God who called Abraham and his seed as a means to reconcile the world to himself. It is that God who promised a son to David who would rule all the nations. Even so the Psalm says, “The Lord shall speak in his wrath, “Yet have I set my King, upon my holy hill of Zion. The Lord has said to me, You are my Son, today I have begotten you. Desire of me and I will give you the nations as your inheritance.” The season of Advent is the moment at which the Church restates the claim that the true God has made upon this world, by making his Son the king over the heavens and the Earth. It must be our prayer, then, that the victory that Jesus has won upon the cross and from the grave, may be made more manifest daily until he comes in glory. We must pray that the secular rulers of our day come to the knowledge that they rule only because they have been given power by the God who reigns from his Heavens. Let us pray that the defeat of death and evil at Calvary may be known in the spread of true justice and peace on the Earth. Oh let us rejoice dear ones, for our king reigns and he comes with the angels! AMEN.