

The Return of Christ

Our second Scripture reading is John 14:1-7. In our text in John's gospel, Jesus has been sharing with his disciples that he is about to be betrayed and also denied by two of his disciples. This prediction no doubt shook their confidence. Also, Jesus told them he was soon to leave them and go to a place to which they could not follow him. Since they had forsaken their livelihood to follow Jesus, this was distressing news to the disciples. Our text begins with Jesus' telling them to not be troubled in heart. And in his message of consolation, Jesus speaks about his return, his Second Coming.

I read John 14:1-7:

14 *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ² In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to the place where I am going."* ⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, which means "coming." Advent is the celebration of the first coming of Jesus Christ, who is the incarnate Son of God, crucified, risen, and reigning in heaven with the Father. We see from our text Jesus promised to come again. As real and factual as was his first coming, so will be his second coming. He's coming again in a triumphal return in glory as prophesied throughout Scripture. We celebrate the birth of the one who was crucified on a cross, buried in a tomb, raised on the third day, and is reigning in heaven, and is coming again in power and glory.

The Second Coming is not an aside truth, but one of the most important in Scripture, being referred to 300 times in the Bible. The early church realized the importance of Jesus' return, and they prayed "*marana tha*," "Come, Lord Jesus (1 Cor. 16:22; Rev. 22:20).

During the Second World War, General Douglas MacArthur, Commander of the US forces in the Far East, encouraged our allies in the Philippines. Upon his escape to Australia on March 30, 1942, MacArthur gave the famous promise, "I shall return" (page 642, *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*). Just as our allies in the besieged Philippines were encouraged by this promise of a victorious return, so has been the church by the promise of Jesus' Return.

Second Coming is important because of what it means to troubled hearts. Jesus as the great sympathetic high priest, understood the troubled hearts of his

disciples. He had warned them that his coming arrest and crucifixion would be a test that some of them would fail. One, the son of perdition, Judas, would betray him. Another, the impulsive Simon Peter, would deny him. Most of the others would simply be scattered in fear. Jesus would confront these fears and tell them to stop being troubled.

You and I have fears of the known. There are circumstances beyond our control that cause us distress. Some of you today have seen a marriage partner desert you and your children. Some may have received a job layoff notice right before Christmas. Others have been diagnosed with a disease that could be troublesome if not actually life-threatening. And, there are fellow believers around the world who are being called upon to suffer for their faithful witness for Christ. Whatever our circumstances, Jesus knows and says “Do not let your hearts be troubled.

The disciples had some three years earlier abandoned their livelihood to follow Jesus, who had taught them about his kingdom and coming glory. Now he’s talking about his death by crucifixion and his departure to a place they could not go until later (13:36). He had told them also that one of them would betray him, and another would deny him (13:18-38). No doubt their confidence was badly shaken, and they were troubled about this unknown future.

And this is what troubles our hearts—the unknown. This includes the unknown that we face in life’s experiences—the unknown about the future of our lives and the well being of those we love. No one can predict the circumstances of tomorrow. We can’t be presumptuous, but must always trust (Lk. 12:22ff; Jas. 4:13-16). When we trust in God, we don’t have to fear the unknown, but can trust he’s in charge, even through the bad things that happen (Rom. 8:28).

But we also face, at the end of this mortal life, the unknown destiny beyond the grave. When you lose a loved one, you face the reality of our future destiny, and without a biblical hope this reality would be troubling indeed. You are forced to ask the question, “What lies out there beyond the cold, dark grave?” Over my 50 years of ministry, I’ve conducted innumerable funerals for church members and for those I never had met. What a difference in preaching at a service for one who was a believer, and walked in assurance of eternal life! Advent is important because we celebrate the birth of one who came to earth, and is coming again for us.

The return of Christ is important because of what it means to troubled hearts, but also for what it means to trusting hearts. Some of you may remember the little inspirational books, titled “Chicken Soup for the Soul.” Jesus is offering his disciples some good strong medicine for the soul—his grace to calm and heal troubled hearts. Jesus says we are simply to not let our hearts be troubled. And the cure for a troubled heart is to have a trusting heart.

Jesus said “Believe in God; believe also in me.” This is high Christology. As he will tell Thomas, who confesses his incredulity and confusion, he is the way the truth and the life. And then Jesus tells Phillip, “He who has seen me has seen the Father.” They must be willing to put their faith in Him. This was not that easy to do. Their Lord, who claimed to bring the Kingdom, was going to be cruelly executed by the religious and political authorities who rejected his claims. Our faith is this side of the cross, the empty tomb, the ascension, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church, which has been the church triumphant. But imagine how difficult it must have been for these disciples to really put their faith in Jesus!

Jesus says they and we must trust in him as equal with the Father. Jesus said, in answer to Thomas’ question, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” If we believe in God, we believe therefore in him. Jesus, born in a lowly manger, and before that, a tiny embryo and helpless fetus, is God the Son! Christ is the Savior, God with us, who died for us, suffering the punishment for the sins we committed. He’s the crucified, now risen Lord. He lives at the right hand of the Father in heaven, and he lives forever to make intercession for us. For those of us who profess a relationship with Jesus, he’s forgiven us, and has given us the Holy Spirit as the seal of our everlasting relationship with him. He’s been, as our Good Shepherd, walking with us throughout our lives, and has been guiding, guarding, and keeping us in his love. He’s been faithful, even when we at times have been unfaithful.

During my childhood, our family of six would travel old highway 25 from central Ohio to the mountains of Western North Carolina, for Christmas and summer vacations with my grandparents. I recall a large sign posted by one of the many hairpin curves overlooking a deep chasm, which read, “Prepare to meet your God.” Considering how my father drove, it was a warning well taken.

Jesus said to his disciples he’ll come again. In the other gospels he tells us more about his second coming, and describes the awesome manner of his return, which will be known to all mankind. Jesus teaches extensively about his return, but never in a way to assuage our curiosity over the details, but to stir us to preparedness. He assures us, as he did these disciples, to encourage us to keep our focus of trust on him alone. His return will bring the fulfillment of his promises of judgment on the wicked and vindication of his children.

Should we remain until the coming of the Lord, Paul says we’ll forego the experience of death. Those who are present with the Lord, and absent from the body, will come with the Lord to meet us in the air. Their bodies, “asleep in Jesus,” will rise from the earth, and we’ll all meet the Lord in the air, and then will begin the Lord’s reign over the renewed creation (1 Thess. 4:15-17). This will be the glorious day of the Lord, spoken of in both the Old and New Testaments. It will be joyful and incredibly glorious for those of us who know him.

What a huge difference between the first advent and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ! Clarence Macartney said it so masterfully:

In Jesus' first coming, He was despised and rejected of men; In His Second, every knee will bow before Him

In His first appearing, He was silent before His accusers at His trial, but when He returns, His voice will shake the heavens and the earth.

At the trial in His first coming, they mocked Him by putting a robe on Him; when He comes again, He will be wearing a robe stained with the blood of His enemies.

In His first visit to earth, His mocking enemies pressed a cruel crown of thorns upon His brow; when He comes again, He will be wearing many crowns designating His rule as King of kings.

Jesus told us he was going to prepare a place for us will return to receive us. All believers since the ascension of Jesus have lived in these "last days," and we're to live with a sense of urgency and preparedness. But also, he may come and receive us in our mortal dying, our passing away in death, when we are separated from our bodies temporarily, while our bodies are asleep in Jesus. Our minds and spirits will be with the Lord in Paradise, where we will have a temporary dwelling until Jesus' return to earth, when all will be gathered for Christ's consummated kingdom.

Often Jesus spoke about our need to be ready and watchful for his return (e.g., Matt. 24:36-51; 24:1-13; 14-30). We're to expect a place. These words Jesus uses to describe our heavenly home are "house," "rooms," and "place." Jesus speaks of the redeemed earth as the Father's house. It won't be an immaterial life on the clouds, but will be very material, i.e. of perfection in substance and beauty.

The King James Version says there are "many mansions" in the Father's house. That has given rise perhaps to materialistic views of every believer's having his own mansion in the sky. Perhaps that mistranslation has also been fed by our selfish individualism that says "as long as I have my mansion in heaven, then all the rest can fend for themselves!" But life in the redeemed creation will be very communal and infinitely rich in perfect love and fellowship with each other and our blessed Savior.

The "place" he's preparing is our lives. He's getting us ready for the eternal, renewed earth. He's preparing us for our place in glory. Our place is prepared when God finishes his work in us, the work of making us more like Jesus and bearing fruit through our faithful living and serving.

As the carol, *Away in a Manger*, says so beautifully,

*“Be near me Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay
Close by me forever, and love me, I pray;
Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care,
And fit us for heaven to live with Thee there”* (anonymous).

We'll come home to that prepared place when he's done all the preparing he needs to do in our lives on this earth. The new heaven and earth will be the culmination of a relationship with Jesus that we're establishing on earth. We'll be rewarded in heaven, says CS Lewis, not for mercenary motives, but as the fulfillment of our deepest desires to relate to God and to glorify him. He says that heaven is really probably the only true desire we as Christians have. It's the longing to be all we were created to be, and to see God in all his fullness. Heaven, says Lewis, is to be “utter satisfaction.” When we see Jesus in glory we'll say, “Here at last is the thing I was made for.”

The way to be ready for Jesus' return is to fill our place of service on earth, during this brief mortal pilgrimage. Jesus the risen Lord has given us a task to do in his Great Commission. Jesus will not come back to earth in his Second Coming until the gospel has been preached to the ends of the earth (Mk. 13:10). And, Jesus will not come to receive you and take you home until you have finished the task he has for you on this earth.

General MacArthur's promise gave encouragement to the troops holding out in the Philippines. When he was in exile in Australia, the general assumed command of the Allied forces in the Southwest Pacific. He was responsible for the re-conquest of the Philippines in 1944-45. On landing on Leyte, an island in the Philippines, MacArthur said, *“I have returned. By the grace of God, our forces stand again on Philippine soil.”* How much more should Jesus' promise of his return encourage us!

