

## ***The Second Coming of Christ***

On this first Sunday of Advent, our second reading is Revelation 19:11-21, as we are challenged in our lectionary to focus on the Second Coming of Christ as we prepare to celebrate his first appearing.

In the closing chapters of the last book in the Bible, we're looking at the climax of human, earthly history and the consummation of the Kingdom of God. The Book of Revelation is apocalyptic writing, highly symbolic literature that conveyed God's truth about his sovereignty over history and his final conclusion of earthly history with his judgment of unbelievers and his fulfilled salvation for believers at Christ's return. The Second Coming of Christ is also prophesied in the introduction to Revelation (1:7), as well as in the four Gospels and the General Epistles. This event is referred to in the New Testament with the Greek word, *Parousia*, meaning literally "*presence, coming, or advent.*"

The Jews of the Old Covenant looked for the Day of the Lord as the first and the only appearing of the Messiah. They failed to see the need for a suffering servant, as portrayed by Isaiah. Instead, they looked to the Messiah to come with judgment upon their enemies, and the immediate inauguration of the Kingdom of God on earth. For this reason, even the disciples of Jesus had difficulty understanding the necessity of suffering and death of their leader, whom they trusted was the Messiah. Even until the moment of Jesus' ascension, they expected an immediate fulfillment of a political kingdom (Acts 1:6).

Those of us in the New Covenant know that Jesus fulfilled in his first coming his work of atonement, he finished his work of providing for our forgiveness of sin and becoming his redeemed children. After the cross and his resurrection, however, Jesus ascended to heaven and then, through the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, has been at work to call his chosen people, his church, to himself, to continue his mission in the world. This present church age is the parenthesis of time that the New Testament calls "the last days." Our text focuses, with vivid symbolism, on the completion of this mission and the Second Coming of Christ, as stated in the Creed.

I read a portion of my text from **Revelation 19:11-20**

*<sup>11</sup> Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. <sup>12</sup> His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. <sup>13</sup> He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God. <sup>14</sup> And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. <sup>15</sup> From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. <sup>16</sup> On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, "King of kings and Lord of lords."*

*<sup>19</sup> "Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against the rider on the horse and against his army. <sup>20</sup> And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed in its presence the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur."*

To some extent every generation since the ascension of Christ Jesus has participated in the last days. And yet it is not inappropriate for us to live in wondrous expectation of the return of Christ. World events, particularly in the Middle East, in Israel, Gaza, Ukraine, and the rapid growth of the gospel and even the heightened persecution of the worldwide church have reinforced my concern and quickened my interest. Believers are always to live in the expectation of the Coming of Christ and with a sense of the urgency, brevity and uncertainty of life. Every successive generation has speculated that the coming of the Lord might be in their day, and yet we're not to speculate about the timetable, which Jesus himself said is futile (Matt. 24:36). Rather we're to live in the awareness of the immanence of our Lord's return, either by his glorious return or of our being with him by means of our "home going," i.e., our death.

The doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ is not meant to be the purview of a few so-called experts, who promulgate in popular fiction their theories about the sensational details of the end times. The Coming of Jesus Christ in power and glory is an important teaching meant to be understood and believed by all the church, and intended for our warning and encouragement. This is undoubtedly the way the churches in Asia Minor, which were the first to receive this Revelation, understood this teaching about the Second Coming of Christ.

If frequency of instruction is any measure of importance, we've reason to believe the Second Coming of Christ is one of the most important teachings in the Bible. Compare that the New Birth is mentioned nine times, baptism twenty times, repentance seventy, and yet the Second Coming is mentioned over three hundred times in the New Testament. Of course, the doctrine of salvation includes a lot more concepts than the New Birth, and frequency of reference is not an accurate way to determine relative importance of biblical doctrines. In any case, however, the fact should be established that God wants his people to understand Jesus Christ is coming again, and his coming demands readiness on our part, as well as encourages us to hope and persevere in faith.

In this fallen world, where often life's struggles and disappointments and the world's values seem more real than the life of faith, we need to see Christ Jesus as the Faithful and True (v. 11). We need a fresh vision of Jesus, that he is the Victor over this world, and that he is faithful. Even when we cannot understand his ways, we must trust that he is always faithful to fulfill his promises and that he is faithful to always be with us. He is Truth itself—the truth of God and the way to truth about ourselves and the world around us (Jn. 8:32; 14:6).

For obedient believers, Christ's Return will not be a sudden surprise. Even the most vigilant Christian, who seeks to focus every thought on an instantaneous, unannounced rapture, could be taken by surprise by an any-moment, secret rapture. Jesus gave many teachings to encourage us to not be caught by surprise, such as his parables about waiting for the master to return (Lk. 12:35-48). Paul said there would be events and conditions that would signal that the Second Coming is immanent (e.g. 2 Thess. 2:1-12).

We're to live in vigilant expectation for the Lord's return, and are to prepare ourselves for the test of tribulation and for living in the very last days of human history, should God so order things. Every generation is to live in the awareness of being in the last days (1 Thess. 5:1-11). And, of course, because biblical history is linear and not cyclical, we know that the final days before the last Antichrist is closer than ever before!

On the other hand, unlike vigilant believers, unbelievers and slackers will be caught off guard completely, as Jesus taught in passages where he compared the day of his return with the days of Noah, when people were totally oblivious to the warnings about God's judgment (Lk.17:26-27). While obedient believers grow in readiness and preparedness, unbelievers will become increasingly oblivious to the signs and warnings of God's word.

I recall my New Testament theology professor in seminary, Wayne Ward, who told about his boyhood in a small town in Arkansas. In their house was a well-known painting of Jesus, and Dr. Ward said the eyes of that painting seemed to haunt him. They followed him wherever he went in that room. All paintings of Jesus are simply attempts to represent the One whose physical appearance is veiled in biblical accounts. Yet, testifies Dr. Ward, this painting gave him as a boy a God-consciousness that served as a needed corrective to his rebellious behavior.

Even now, nothing in our lives is hidden from his eyes, which are "like a flame of fire" (v.12). We need this awareness of his presence, and how he's grieved by all our sin, which is never hidden from his full scrutiny. The blazing eyes of Jesus light up the sinful guilt of those who make religious pretense, but whose hearts are far from him. The blazing eyes of Christ indicate that he always knows the spiritual condition of the ungodly who claim to be members of the covenant community and yet are not truly in the faith (GK Beale). Also Christ sees the sin and guilt of the openly unbelieving and ungodly, who must face his judgment. Our prayer should always be, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:24-25).

The Warrior King Jesus is engaged in a bloody conflict with the kingdom of darkness. His robe is dipped in blood, the blood shed on the cross for our sins (v.13). "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world" (Eph. 6:12). Christ fights with the sword of the Spirit, the word of God (v.15 and Eph.6:17). The danger for the follower of Christ is not in spiritual warfare, but in *not* fighting the spiritual battles (Ps. 144:1). We're to don the full armour of God, and to fight this battle with spiritual weapons, such as prayer (2 Cor. 10:4).

When Christ comes to bring judgment on the unbelieving world, he'll bring the consummation of salvation to those of us who believe in him and long for his appearing. He's on his way to the wedding feast described in the first ten verses of this nineteenth chapter. Paul describes the Second Coming of Christ as a glorious heavenly reunion (1 Thess. 4:16-17). Weddings are great occasions for family reunions, and a time for meeting new members of the family. In contrast, funerals and memorial services are sad occasions, as we say "Good-bye" to loved ones who have died. Yet, for Christians, they are also times of glad reunion with family and friends who can celebrate our hope in Christ.

The Lord Jesus is pictured as the Warrior King who comes to bring final salvation to his elect, but also to bring judgment, first to Satan and then to all his followers. First we saw Christ as the Bridegroom calling us to join him at the wedding feast. Now he is the warrior Judge (vv.17-18). Jesus will reveal his power and mete out his judgment on all nations. By his word he created the world, and by his word he redeems those who believe in him. Finally, by his word he will destroy his enemies (v.15). The Prophet Isaiah says God waits and even longs to be gracious and merciful (Is. 30:18). But with the Second Coming he waits no

longer. The finality of our text shows that the offer of God's grace is not inexhaustible and never ending.

As Paul says in Philippians 2:10-11, "...at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." For the unredeemed, this will not be a joyful, but rather a regretful and even dreadful admission. Everyone, including the enemies of Christ, will admit that he is Lord. The Lord, for unbelievers, will be the dreaded judge and warrior. For his people, he will come to rescue us. All evil and suffering will finally be eradicated.

Those who've suffered intensely under blasphemers, who've mocked God, destroyed their homes and churches, and persecuted and even killed friends and family members, can understand the necessity of God's justice and judgment. New Testament scholar Robert Mounce writes, "It is not true...that with the coming of the gospel age the God of the Old Testament decided to prove to men that he really was a gentleman after all and so dispensed with any further recourse to judgment." Christ is the "rider on the horse" who will judge and punish all unbelief and sin, and will rectify all evil and unjust suffering and will vindicate all who have suffered unjustly."

There will be a vast difference between Christ's first advent and his Second Coming. As the great Presbyterian preacher, Clarence Macartney said,

*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.*

*....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.*

When Scripture teaches this doctrine of the Second Coming, the intent is not to satisfy curiosity about the details, but to encourage us to persevere in faith and hope.

Years ago, during the time the United States was involved in what seemed an interminable war in Vietnam, I recall a television news interview with a young military wife and mother, whose husband had been deployed for years in dangerous combat in Vietnam. The soldier's little preschool boy was standing beside his mother during the interview, holding a large framed photograph of his soldier daddy, seated with his wife and holding his little son. Interrupting the interview, the little boy said, while looking longingly at the photo, "I wish my daddy could step out of this picture."

We long for our Savior to step out of the picture, out of the eternal realm into this fallen, broken world of darkness and to consummate his glorious reign. Living with a longing for Jesus to step out of the picture is the way to prepare for meeting him (1 Jn. 2:28). Then we'll nevermore doubt his love for us.

In a short while we'll recite together the Apostle's Creed. May we all say in the words of the creed, with conviction, "I believe Jesus ascended and is coming again." Thanks be to God!