

Jesus our hope is coming: how awe-full

Advent presentation

Saint Katherine Drexel parish

Frederick, Maryland

14 December 2008

**As Christians we are an *eschatological* people,
that is to say, we look forward to the *advent* of the God-man,
Jesus the Christ, in *glory*.**

What does this mean for us?

What are to expect?

How are we to prepare?

This was the announcement description

for this evening's presentation.

I am presuming it was attractive enough to prompt you to come,

unless, of course you are being paid to be here,

or were dragged here!

At any rate, I am happy to be here!

I am happy to be here because I get to be with you (!).

And I am happy to be here

because we *are* an *eschatological* people.

We are a people in whom there is a fire, a divine passion,

that makes us long for the completion of all things.

We indeed, by the love that indwells us,

yearn for perfection and fullness.

You may have noticed: our world is awesome in so many ways,

but there are a few imperfections

—like pollution and cancer and theft and bad hair.

Our evening together will hopefully serve,

in its own way, to fan this fire of longing

for the definitive transfiguration of ourselves and our world.

Eschatological people means that

we are a people turned towards the “last things”.

Eschatology is the doctrine of last things.

We could also say the doctrine of “end times”.

This, of course, is rather vague.

“Last things” or “end times” sounds more like cosmic and social conditions and events than anything.

And it sounds like an opportunity for Christians to be elsewhere in their heads.

As we will see, being eschatological does not promote “existential absenteeism” or disengagement or being spaced.

When we say that we are an eschatological people, we refer to *Jesus*, a real person, and his Second Coming.

You may have heard about it: watch out!!

(well, actually, do not “watch out”,

because we do not know when it will occur.)

The Second Coming of Christ will be the final, definitive coming: *the* last thing humanity and our universe will experience, the ultimate transfiguration.

Is it a fearful event? Is it an awful event?

Or is it an awe-full mystery, a mystery which ought to *fill with awe*?

Many would lean towards saying fearful and awful.

And it is very tempting to agree.

Mark, in chapter 13 of his gospel, does a great job of scaring the ship out of us:

- the destruction of the Temple
- cosmic upheaval
- persecution for disciples
- bizarre tribulation

- the arrival of false prophets

and after all this:

“the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken”. (v. 24)

(Thanks Mark!)

These questions are very real questions.

And the Second Coming is—or at least, *should be*—on our radar, on our horizon.

Indeed, each and every Sunday, at Mass, we beseech the Second Coming:

- **“Christ will come again”**
- **“Until you come in glory”**
- **“Lord Jesus, come in glory”**

These questions are *very* real questions during Advent, because Advent, in a special way, in the life of the Church that we are, is about *coming*.

“Advent”, of course, means “coming”.

During Advent, with particular focus, we turn towards Christ coming, towards Christ who comes.

Now, we need to ask: if Christ has already come, and we are trying to focus on Him coming, then is not Advent more about this *Second* Coming?

I do believe...

And if so, then how is it that Advent got reduced to a time of preparation for Christmas: the four-week period of decorating and baking and writing and, of course, shop-a-thonning?

Aah: that we prepare for Christmas is not totally non-sense.

We look forward to the Second Coming

only because there was a *First Coming*.

We look forward to Christ's return

only because we have been encountered by

and are in relationship with Christ.

And so this is what I would first like to consider with you:

the First Coming.

We rightly celebrate Christmas, and rightly prepare for it.

But we do not simply celebrate a great 2000-plus-year-old event.

We approach a *mystery* that does not grow old: the Incarnation.

We approach anew the Word made flesh,

who *has come* and who *is coming*.

The First Coming is entirely ordained to the Second Coming.

The Second Coming completes the First Coming.

This means that we are all meant for glory,

i.e. the fullness of God's love and light.

Let us then approach the Word made flesh, Jesus, the Christ.

It is in approaching him

that we long and are readied for His Second Coming.

Why the Word become flesh? Why the Incarnation?

Because God is insanely in love (or wisely in love) with humanity.

Because God is love, and thus wishes to reveal, i.e. share himself The Word

become flesh is God sharing himself.

The Word become flesh is God come closer.

The Word becomes flesh gives God a face.

Do not forget Jesus' words,

“He who sees me, sees the Father...”

The Word becomes flesh espouses our flesh, our frailty.
And with this coming of the Son,
God gives Himself to each person—no longer just to “the people”,
as was largely and primarily the case in the Old Covenant.
Through the Son, God gazes upon each person
in a unique fashion, and embraces each person in a new way.
In other words, God goes all the way in the revelation of Himself.

In Mathew 11:27, Jesus Himself says that

**“no one knows the Father except the Son,
and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal Him.”**

And the Son indeed reveals him!

It is a revelation that is full.

It is a secret made fully known.

**“I no longer call you servants but I call you friends,
because I have told you *everything* I have heard from my Father.”**

(John 15:15)

We have been chosen by Christ

- to receive his secrets
- to be his friends

This Christ we believe will come again.

There is no proof of it.

We simply have a deep inner sense thanks to the gift of faith.

When will he come?

As mentioned, we do not know.

Mark (in that daunting chapter 13 of his), says

**“Of that day or hour, no one knows,
neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son.”**

Wait, how can Jesus Himself be clueless?

Saint Thomas Aquinas says that

**“The Son is said not to know
insofar as He does not impart the knowledge to us.”**

(Summa Theologica, Supplement, Q. 88, article 3, sed contra).

If we do not know when Christ will come,
then how can we be ready?

Well, let us state that we are not looking for an event.

We are looking for a *person*.

We are looking for a person who is already present
(which, as we said, eliminates any “existential absenteeism”).

This is important to know, for it sheds light on the question
of readiness for the Second Coming.

Christ’s second coming

will not be Christ coming from the outside.

Christ’s second coming will be Christ, *present*,
rendering himself manifest—somehow, mysteriously.

If so, we do not look to the sky, we look within,
where Christ abides.

Attentiveness and surrender to this inner presence
is how we prepare for this second coming.

In Mark 13 (34-38), Jesus offers a parable
—meant to shed light on the Second Coming,
in which you will notice that the servants
who await the return of their master
have each been given a task.

It is revealed that *we* are servants with a task, with work to do,
whose accomplishment somehow prepares us

for the Second Coming.

What is our task? What is our work?

Many of us are probably thinking: my daily tasks,
i.e. feeding the dog, doing the dishes,
raising the kids (if we have any), and painting the bathroom.

All of these are important tasks.

Do they, however, prepare me for the Second Coming?

It would probably be a stretch to say that
they *directly* prepare me for the Second Coming.

They can only *directly* prepare for the Second Coming
if they are grace filled—which they can be!

It is important to realize that
the unsettling descriptions of cosmic upheaval, etc.
—all of which *precede* the Second Coming,
but are *not* the Second Coming itself—
underscore the newness associated with
the manifestation of Christ at the Second Coming.

The Christ we know will manifest himself in a *new* way,
which will re-*new* all things.

Christ transcends us and the universe,
And, by virtue of his definitive coming,
will *transfigure everything*.

There is a discontinuity between the natural and the supernatural;
not a discontinuity between evil and good,
but between good and infinitely better because infinitely good.
We access the infinitely better by means of the infinitely better,
not simply by inflating the good.

In other words, I do not access God's inner life
simply by being a good person.

Being a good person is, well, good!
But God, who is transcendent source of all things,
in His inner life, transcends me.
He opens the doors to me, freely, as a gift to me.
Christ's presence is currently real and intense, but hidden.
When his presence becomes manifest,
 everything will be changed for the better.

And so, bathing the cat, trimming the shrubs,
frosting the cupcakes, answering the telephone
do not immediately or directly prepare me for the Second Coming.
They *do* prepare me for the Second Coming
when they are lived in communion with the One who is coming: Christ.
This means, therefore, that there is a more fundamental "work"
that underlies all of these daily tasks,
 which Christ himself articulates.
He, in fact—as I read it, articulates two tasks
(which are connected):

1. Firstly, in John 6:29, Jesus says:

"The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

2. Secondly, at the Last Supper, Jesus repeatedly says:

(without explicitly using the word "work"):

"Love one another."

This is what we are to *do*.
And there is an order between the two.
Everything centers on the God-man,
i.e. everything begins with loving acquiescence
to Jesus the Christ,
from whose intimacy we are sent forth to love.

Jesus, in fact, says, quite interestingly,
after giving this new commandment (14:12)

**‘Whoever believes in me will do the works that I do,
and will do greater ones than these.’**

We will see try to consider what these “greater works” might be,
in exploring the two tasks that are ours:

1. Believing in the One God has sent
2. Loving one another

1. Believing in the One God has sent: *how do I exercise
this faith in the one God has sent?*

The exercise of faith is really what prayer is.

2. Loving one another: *how do I love my neighbor
as Christ does?*

By laying down my life and allowing, in that deliberate act,
the love of Christ himself, to flow and work through me.

If we are reading correctly,
we prepare for the Second Coming

- in faith, exercised most properly in prayer
- in divine love, exercised between one another

(And let us not forget *hope*, squeezed in there somewhere!)

Let us explore prayer.

Prayer is not easy.

You may have noticed!

It should be the least complicated act, yet we struggle with it:

parades of distraction, feelings of void, turning in circles.

When asked how to pray, Jesus tells His disciples (in Matthew 6:9):

“This is how you are to pray:

‘Our Father Who art in Heaven, Hallowed be Thy Name...’”

It is a very unsettling “how”, because, strictly speaking, it does not really show us *how* to pray.

“OK, so I say ‘Our Father’, but *how*?”

“Lord, I say ‘Our Father’, but nothing happens!”

Indeed, we do not really know how to pray—none of us!

If anyone thinks that he or she knows how, please come forward and show us!

There are no professional pray-ers in this room.

St. Paul says in Romans 8:26:

“We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes with inexpressible groanings...”

Saint Therese (in her autobiography) defines prayer as

“a cry of the heart, a simple gaze turned toward heaven”

Hmm: inexpressible groanings with the help of the Holy Spirit.

This intimacy which is prayer does not first depend, as Romans 9:16 suggests, on a person’s will and exertion, but upon the mercy of God.

We have been *chosen*.

1 John 4:10 reads: **“This is love, not that we have loved God, but that he has loved us.”**

Prayer is first a response to God who always takes the initiative, and who welcomes us as we are—which should make it simple!

And yet...

We never master prayer.

Why?

Because prayer is an affair of love which knows no mastery.

None of us are master lovers

—in love of friendship or love of God.
One does not master the art of loving,
because loving is not an art.
In love, I find myself before a person
who draws me and transcends me—a person *other* than me,
and so I stammer: inexpressible groanings...

Jesus also says in Mathew 26:

**“When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door,
and pray to your Father in secret,
and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.”**

We discover God in secret.

When Jesus says **“pray to your Father in secret”**,
he is saying “withdraw into the depths of your heart,
and there you will discover the mystery of God”
—who is father (meaning transcendent source),
and is also, in a sense, mother.

We do not have time to go into

the fatherhood and motherhood of God.

The fatherhood of God is not about maleness.

It is an analogy referring the transcendence of God.

God is other (which does not mean distant).

God is also mother,

an analogy referring to the *immanence* of God.

God, who is not me, is within, is immanent to me,

i.e. really close!

God the father includes God the mother,

But the first reference is father,

because transcendence precedes immanence.

Does this make sense?

I am so sure it does, so let us move on!

The mystery of God is discovered
as we let the heart of Jesus embrace our heart.

The embrace makes us one with the Father
as the Son is one with the Father.

What the Son is by nature we are by adoption,
and our adoption occurs in an embrace—an interior, eternal embrace.

We become children in the Son,
and thus are called to the same oneness, to the same glory,
the glory which the Father and the Son share from all eternity.

If this is true, then in prayer we are ready for the Second Coming!

The Second Coming is essentially
Jesus definitively introducing us into the Trinitarian life.

Jesus' great desire is to make of us children and friends.

Jesus gives us His life so that this divine childhood be our reality.

Jesus, full of grace, communicates the grace of regeneration
which takes hold of our hearts, our person,

so that we might become children
who cry with Him "Abba, Father".

Through the grace that Jesus communicates, we are born again,
and we enter into Jesus' own cry, "Abba, Father."

Entering into Jesus' cry, "Abba", is the peak prayer experience.

There is nothing more intimate than Jesus' gaze upon the Father.

Saint Thomas Aquinas, in his commentary on the Gospel of John,

says that **"Seeing the Father (and thus already contemplating Him in faith, which is ordered to the beatific vision) is the end, the ultimate purpose of all our desires and acts, such that there is nothing beyond it to be sought."**

From this intimacy, Jesus sends us forth,

“Love one another as I love you.”

This is the *other* task that awaits us,

the other task which prepares for the Second Coming.

Saint Therese of Lisieux asks how this task,

given in the form of a new commandment, is even possible.

“Love one another as I love you” (John 13:34).

I mean: think about it.

Who can love as Jesus loves, save Jesus?

Why would Jesus ask the impossible?

Was Jesus bored and thought,

“Let’s have some fun,

and ask them to do something they cannot,

so we can watch them fall flat on their faces.

It’ll be entertaining—like a good episode of South Park!”

Saint Therese comes to the following realization:

In the Old Law, when God told His people to love their neighbour as themselves, He had not yet come upon earth; and knowing full well how man loves himself, He could not ask anything greater.

But when Our Lord gave His Apostles a New Commandment—“His own commandment”—He was not content with saying: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself,”

but would have them love even as He had loved, and as He will love till the end of time.

**O my Jesus! You never ask what is impossible;
Thou know better than I, how frail and imperfect I am,
and Thou know that I shall never love my Sisters
as Thou hast loved them, unless within me Thou love them,
dear Lord! It is because Thou dost desire to grant me this grace that Thou
hast given a New Commandment.**

**Oh how I love it, since I am assured thereby
that it is Your Will to love in me all those You bid me love!**

We have been given the very love of Christ's heart
to love one another—nothing less than that!

What more perfect preparation could there be
for his final manifestation?

In loving one another, we abide in the heart to be fully revealed.

Let me close with a few more thoughts as we try to

- believe in Jesus
- love one another.

I lean on St. Augustine for these thoughts.

He (supposedly) says that

- wanting to believe is already believing
- wanting to love is already loving

One of the great difficulties in our spiritual life

stems from a false idea that we have:

that emotion confirms the genuineness of our experience.

In other words, if I do not feel something,

I am not really experiencing.

This idea is already false when it comes to the deeper,
truly human experiences in life.

It is all the more false when it comes to prayer.

God is spirit, and therefore does not necessarily awaken
emotions or feelings in me.

His presence can, but it does not necessarily.

When I tell God, therefore, that I believe in Him,

that I hope in him, that I love Him,

I truly touch God and I am in communion with God

- even though I do not feel a thing

- even though there are no emotions which I tend to consider to be confirmation of the genuineness of my experiences

If there are emotions, praise God!

If there are no emotions, praise God!

It is difficult to understand, and when we are high and dry, we are tempted to go looking for water elsewhere.

When we are high and dry, oases appear on the horizon.

We must, therefore, ask for the grace of perseverance.

Thanks be to God that this intimate discovery of God gives us confidence and certitude;

it gives us the certitude of hope,

the hope that we are made for glory. We are destined for God.

We have become co-heirs with Christ,

and therefore His inheritance is our inheritance.

We thus yearn for the Second Coming.

Oh, so what about the works greater than those of Jesus that we are supposed to accomplish?

“Whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these.” (John 14:12)

Really: who is going to accomplish works greater than Jesus?

No one! Jesus can only be speaking of works that he will somehow be accomplishing.

Jesus himself prepares his definitive manifestation, *through* his disciples.

Until the end of time, Christ works through his friends,

to *love* through his friends, further bringing his reign of love.

It is this furtherance that prepares the Second Coming,

that beckons the Second Coming,

which will be the completion of the reign.

The greater works of which Jesus speaks are our daily task.

They are works which we both do
and which Jesus does through us.
And, in the end, they are Him increasingly loving the world.
It is very concrete for us.

It is precisely what we have been saying.

It entails believing in Him and cooperating with Him,

- by loving one another
- by welcoming all those whom He brings across our path each day.

It is *very* concrete.

We are not to worry for a thing.

We are to be watchful and alert in love.

We are to love Him (in prayer) and one another (in service).

Again, we are not watching for an event, but a Person.

When we love someone, we are always ready for them,
and in a sense, be they physically absent, they never leave...

Let us ask for the grace to love more and more,

and thus be ready for the One who is love

- as He comes at each moment in the secrecy of our hearts
- when He comes to bring all things to completion,
that God be “through all and in all” (Eph. 4:6).