



Sermon for First Sunday in Advent Romans 13:8-14 & St. Matthew 21:1-13

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November 28, 2010 — Advent 1

Last Sunday, as we ended the Church Year and as the lessons pointed us into Advent and toward Christmas—into the *new* year—I noted that as followers of Jesus Christ, we live *in* the world, but we are not *of* the world. When we trust in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for our redemption and as we make him our Lord, Jesus changes our loyalties. In our baptism he graciously marks us as his own and gives us a new citizenship. At his Table he graciously offers us the Bread of Heaven—a foretaste of the great feast that awaits us in eternity. He has given us life, and yet the life we live here—in but not *of* the world—is just that: a foretaste. God's kingdom *is* real. When John the Baptist preached that the kingdom of God was at hand, it truly was. Jesus ushered in that kingdom when he came in the flesh at his First Advent. His kingdom is a reality, but it's not like any other kingdom that has ever existed. It's a spiritual kingdom—and it's a spiritual kingdom because its purpose is redemption.

Think about that. How many earthly kingdoms have been about redemption? Earthly kingdoms are usually about conquest. Nebuchadnezzar, Alexander, Caesar—they conquered the world because they wanted power. They weren't particularly concerned about the welfare of the people they defeated. Jesus' kingdom is different. The tendency of earthly kingdoms is to suppress, maim, shoot, nuke, or otherwise in some way kill, destroy, or subdue the enemy. God will show his wrath against his enemies on the last day, but in the meantime he has chosen to establish his kingdom through his Son—a spiritual kingdom through which he calls his *enemies* back to himself—calls them to be his friends again and offers not judgement or destruction, but forgiveness through Christ. And to do that, he establishes his spiritual kingdom right alongside the world's kingdoms in order to give us, his enemies, a chance to receive his grace and change our loyalties before the day of “shock and awe” comes at the Second Advent—the day when there will no more be two kingdoms side by

side, but God's kingdom alone, no longer just a spiritual reality, but a physical reality as well, and a time when his gracious offer of redemption will expire and all those who are still loyal to the world will be justly punished.

In the book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar we're told had a dream. He saw a great statue of gold and silver and bronze that Daniel told him represented the great kings and kingdoms of the world. In that dream, a stone not made with hands smashed into the statue, breaking it to pieces. And yet it didn't stop there. The stone grew, becoming a great mountain, eventually filling the whole earth. Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar that the stone that filled the earth represented God's kingdom. Friends, that's exactly what happened at Jesus' First Advent. As God had foretold in the days of Adam and Eve, the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent—he would destroy the power of Satan, the prince of this world and all of his worldly kingdoms. God would usher in his own kingdom and like that stone, it's been growing and filling the world ever since in anticipation of his Second Advent when it *will* be consummated.

But that stone not made with hands—the kingdom of heaven—doesn't grow by force. It grows through the gracious power of the Holy Spirit. It grows as God's kingdom people share the good news—the Gospel—with the world around them, and maybe more importantly, as they live it out in their lives and manifest the power of the Spirit to change hearts and loyalties—as they demonstrate what it truly means to live as God's people. But, brothers and sisters, there's a limited number of days between Jesus' first coming and his second. We don't know how long that time will be, but Scripture tells us over and over that the time is short. We've been given work to do and every day that passes is one less day we have to get it done. God's given us the privilege of building his kingdom, and that's why last week we prayed, asking him to stir up the wills of his faithful people, so that we might produce abundantly the fruit of good works. Today we're called again to prepare for Jesus' return. We're reminded not to be complacent in our faith and we're reminded not to take God's grace for granted. This is truly what our celebration of Christmas—of Christ's birth—is all about. As we stand before the manger, we're reminded what we really are and where we stand in light of God's plan. Through the season of Advent we're going to be reminded that our King is coming, but we need to remember that this message is a call to us to prepare for his coming by opening our hearts to his grace. Just as John the Baptist called the people to

repent, because Jesus was about to usher in the kingdom of God, the Church and the Scriptures now call us to be prepared for the consummation of God's kingdom—to be busy about the work of the kingdom—and they warning not to waste the limited time we've been given.

Our Epistle today gives us specifics in terms of what it means for us to be preparing. The passage is from Romans 13, beginning at the eighth verse.

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)

God's kingdom is a holy kingdom and he calls his people to be holy people. In the Old Testament he gave the law, through Moses, so that the people would know what holiness looks like. Consider that the law wasn't just a bunch of arbitrary rules. They define right and wrong—they define *holiness*—and holiness is defined by the very character of God himself. This is why right and wrong don't change. This is why morality is absolute. It's not based on arbitrary or on cultural standards that change from place to place or from time to time—we see that happening all around us. No, right and wrong, good and evil, are always absolute because God's character defines them. To be holy and to live righteously is to be godly.

Jesus confronted the Pharisees because they approached the law as little more than a set of rules. They didn't put them together. They didn't consider the character of God that lay behind them. They thought that if they kept the letter of the law, that they had fulfilled it. This was the problem of the lawyer who approached Jesus to ask what he needed to do to be saved. Jesus asked him what was written in the law and the man rightly summed up the law saying that it was to love God and to love one's neighbour. Jesus told him, “You're right. Now do this and you will live.” Of course, that was too simple for the man, so he asked, “Who is my neighbour?” Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan in response. The Pharisee's neighbour was literally the man next door because he was only concerned with the letter of the law. Jesus pointed behind the law, to God's character, and shook that man's world by telling him that everyone—

even his enemies—were his neighbours—that even his enemies were deserving of love. God’s character is love. Even when in his wrath he justly punishes sin, he never ceases to love.

As Christians we have experienced the amazing love of God. While we were yet sinners, he loved us—and offered *his* own Son as a sacrifice for *our* sins. Brothers and sisters, that is love. This is why St. John confronts us saying, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20). This might just be the most difficult lesson of the Christian life, first to learn, and then to live—and yet this is what it means to be prepared.

Because we know that God loves even the worst of us and because we have experienced God’s love so profoundly, St. John asks how a man can claim to love God and yet hate his brother. A Christian Pharisee might come back and ask, “Who is my brother?” Jesus has already answered that question. If we want to be prepared for kingdom life, we need to take stock of our attitude and ask if there are people we don’t love. Some people are easy to love; some aren’t. It’s easy—most of the time—to love your husband or your wife, your best friend, and your children. It’s not always easy to love your neighbour or the co-worker who rubs you the wrong way. It’s downright hard to love the guy who cut you off on the highway or the politician who raised your taxes. It seems utterly impossible to love the child molester in prison or the terrorist with a bomb. And yet God loves each of those people—loves each of them enough to offer them redemption through the death of his own Son. We should be outraged by sin and injustice. We should work to bring it to account and to see an end to it, and yet justice can never be an excuse to stop loving. After all, if you and I were to receive the justice our sins really deserve instead of God’s mercy, we would stand under his wrath just as everyone else. This is why we would do well to regularly meditate on the depth of our own sinfulness, on the death we deserve, and on the amazing love that God has shown us in Christ—love we don’t deserve and could never earn. That kind of meditation is what begins to break down our pride and self-righteousness and creates a love in us, even as we seek justice and even as we are angered by sin, that desires for the lost to be saved, that moves us to pray for them, and whenever possible to share the Gospel with them, that instead of cursing our

enemies, we bless them and show them the love of God.

That’s kingdom life and it’s as God’s people live it out, that his kingdom grows and overthrows the kingdoms of the world. And it’s as we grow in the life of love that we become better prepared to meet our Saviour face to face—to live in eternity in the midst of the Lamb and before the throne of God.

Paul goes on in verses 11 and 12:

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand.

Most of us are terrible procrastinators. “I’ll do it tomorrow,” is our motto whether it’s getting to the gym, trimming the hedge, or cleaning the basement—or far worse, when it comes to obedience to God. I’ll start reading my Bible...tomorrow. I’ll start praying daily...tomorrow. I’ll start putting my God-given gifts to work in the Church...tomorrow. I’ll start giving sacrificially...tomorrow. I’ll set aside that sin in my life...tomorrow. I’ll start learning to love people as God loves them...tomorrow. Brothers and sisters, tomorrow is always tomorrow and pretty soon we’ve squandered the time God has given us. Paul practically shouts at us: “Sleeper awake!” The night is nearly gone and the day is coming. God has only given us so much time. We need to use it wisely. Then he goes on:

The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Romans 13:12-14)

Yes, it’s dark out there, but through Christ, you and I already live in the light and the time isn’t far off when the darkness will be gone completely—so why are we still walking in the dark? Why are we not preparing for the full coming of the light? When Jesus comes to consummate his kingdom, will you be ready? It’s going to be a shock to everyone to suddenly be living in the full presence of God’s holiness. Even the holiest of the saints is far from perfection, but the New Jerusalem is going to be a bigger shock for some than for

others. Those who put their time to use pursuing holiness not only live in anticipation of the light, but they’re going to be ready for it when it comes, because they’ve spent their lives focusing on the light and becoming accustomed to it. Those who waste their time—those of us who keep walking in the dark—are suddenly going to realise just what they’ve squandered when that day comes—when the light comes and they can’t look at it because they’re so accustomed to the dark. But worse by far is the fact that as long as God’s people keep walking in the dark—walking in the ways of the world instead of in the ways of heaven—we fail in our mission. God calls us to be salt *and* light to the world—to be witnesses of the new life Jesus offers. That’s our mission and it’s been given to every single one of us. But Paul reminds us that our time is limited. Don’t waste it. Wake up! Start living in the light.

Today’s Gospel, St. Matthew’s account of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, gives us two examples of what it means to be prepared and a warning. First we see the disciples. Jesus planned on riding into Jerusalem and he sent two of the disciples to the nearby village to get him a donkey that he said would be tied there. Jesus knew what he was doing. He was entering Jerusalem as the King coming to establish his kingdom, but he was a humble king. He wasn’t riding in on a chariot with a sword. He was riding in on a donkey—the humblest of animals—to establish his kingdom by being a servant to his people and by going to his death for them. The disciples had learned to trust him—at least more than they trusted him in last week’s Gospel. When Jesus asked them where they would find bread to feed the crowd of thousands they were thinking in strictly earthly terms and saw no way to do it. It didn’t occur to them to just trust Jesus. Now he prophetically tells them to get him a donkey that’s tied in Bethany. They trusted him and they went. Was their trust perfect? No. We’ll see them stumbling and falling and doubting in the rest of the story as they see him arrested and run away, as Peter denies him three times, and as we see them cowering in fear of the authorities after the crucifixion. But look how far they’ve come.

The disciples give us a positive example of faith in Christ. We all start somewhere. When Jesus finds us we all have weak faith. Sometimes it’s all we can do to trust him with our souls. We look to him for salvation from eternal death, but we’re unable to give up some of our sins. In many cases our lives are full of sin, but the Holy Spirit hasn’t had time yet to open our eyes to them. We trust

in Jesus for salvation, but we're not ready to let him be Lord of our lives. We hold back our family or our health or our job or our finances. And yet as we follow Jesus through the years, as we open ourselves to the means of grace by steeping ourselves in the Scriptures, by living prayerful lives, by receiving the Sacraments, and by living in fellowship and love with our brothers and sisters we learn to trust him more and more, we become more and more aware of the need for personal holiness, and more and more we grow in grace and love. We go from being people who can't imagine that Jesus can take care of our worries in life to being people who, when he calls us to do something, simply say "Yes, Lord!" as we go and do it like those two disciples who went off in full confidence to get that donkey.

The Gospel gives us the second example of the people who lined the road from Bethany to welcome Jesus to Jerusalem as King. This was where Lazarus had been raised from the dead and many of these people were, no doubt, well aware of that miracle. They'd heard Jesus' teaching and seen his miracles. They gave him praise and they made him welcome as their King by putting their own coats and palm branches on the road for him to ride over. Most importantly they cried out: "Hosanna!" Hosanna is an exclamation of praise that literally means "Save! I pray!" These were people who knew their need, who had seen the love and power of Jesus, and who cried out for what he had to offer. Jesus was riding humbly by on a donkey, but they were even humbler—poor sinners who knew their place before God, who knew their need for salvation, and came for it to the humble Messiah who would be dying for them in just a few days.

Are we like those people? Or, having once heard the Gospel, do we take it for granted? Are we hungry for Christ and for his salvation—for the light he has brought into the world? Or are we tied up and obsessed with life in the world's darkness? The Gospel gives us a very stern warning in the example of the temple. The disciples were prepared. The people were prepared. The one place that wasn't prepared was the temple—the very place that was the centre of God's worship. The first place Jesus went was the temple and when he got there he turned over the tables of the money-changers and the people selling doves for the sacrifices—the merchants who were ripping off worshippers. And he says to them: "'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers." There are several times we see Jesus confront the self-

righteous, but this is the only example we have of wrath and judgement on his part. The temple wasn't the only place in Jerusalem where evil was taking place. He could have gone to the central market or to Herod's palace and done something similar, but instead he went to the temple. He went to the place that should have been at the centre of the worship of God and found there a bunch of people and religious leaders who took God's salvation for granted and who used it as a pretext for ripping off the poor—people like those who had lined the road from Bethany, people who understood what true worship was.

It's interesting that New Testament writers like Paul and Peter and James reserve their strongest words of condemnation for Christians and for the Church. Like those people Jesus confronted, we can often take Jesus and the salvation he offers for granted. We get so overcome with the world that we forget the kingdom and the light and live in the darkness. Instead of trusting in God, we trust in princes and horses and chariots. We forget the law of love. We look at the lost sinners of the world with self-righteous eyes, scorning them, and forgetting that we are no different aside from the righteousness of Christ. We judge and condemn rather than sharing the love of Christ with them. We treat them as if we'd rather see them rot in hell than turn to Christ and be saved. We look at the sin of the world and turn to government and legislation as the solution to the problem, forgetting that the only real solution is the Gospel. We fall into sin ourselves—we fall *out of love with God and our neighbour*, we cease to be obedient to God's commands, and our brothers and sisters never call us to account, the Church never disciplines, and pretty soon the Church hardly looks any different from the world—it's so lacking in love and so full of darkness that no one will ever be attracted to the light it should be shining into the world.

That's what happened to the Jews. They took God for granted and instead of walking in the light, they lived in the dark. We may not worship pagan idols alongside God's altar like they did, but we have all sorts of other idols of our own that we put ahead of God. They claimed to trust in God as their Saviour, and yet when it came down to making important decisions for the welfare of the nation, their kings showed that their real trust was in worldly powers. Their pagan neighbours weren't ignorant. They knew who the God of Israel was and yet as they looked at the Jewish kingdoms they saw no evidence that the Jews actually trusted in or really even worshipped him. They

mocked the Jews saying things like, "Where is their God?" Where indeed? There was little or no evidence of him in their lives. Consider that Christ has made us a new temple. He's put his Spirit in our lives. We are his people—called to be a light to the world just as the Jews were. But when you look at your life, would your unbelieving friends mock you the way the nations mocked Israel? Would they laughingly ask, "Where is your God?"

God spoke through the prophet Malachi, saying:

Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple...But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. (Malachi 3:1-2)

We have the example of Jesus' first coming to his temple as a gracious warning and we know that he *will* come again to his new temple. The time is short. The night is far gone. The day is at hand. We can be like the disciples who trusted Jesus and were obedient. We can be like the people who welcomed him and cried out to him for salvation—again in trust and obedience. We can trust our Lord and live obediently in love. Or we can take Jesus for granted, continuing to live in the darkness, and offering no witness to the world—living completely unprepared for his coming and squandering the gifts he's given.

And so we pray: "Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and to put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility so that on the last day, when he will come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal, through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen."