



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The Day is at Hand St. Matthew 21:1-13 &

Romans 13:8-14

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At first glance, it might seem odd that Advent begins with a Gospel lesson that we usually associate with Palm Sunday. In Matthew 21 we read about Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey as the crowds waved palm branches and hailed him as the son of David, as the Messiah, as the long-promised and long-awaited King. Matthew connects that first “Palm Sunday” with the prophecy spoken through Isaiah: “Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey.” Why the Palm Sunday Gospel as we begin a new Church Year and prepare for Christmas? Because Advent is our annual reminder of the coming of the King. On the one hand, as it leads us to Christmas, it prepares us for our remembrance and celebration of Jesus’ birth—his first advent. It reminds us, too, as in our Gospel today, that the King has *already* come to establish his kingdom. And, finally, it reminds us that the King is coming back to finish what he has begun. Advent proclaims the royal summons: God’s King has come. Advent calls us to repentance as we kneel before the King and give him our all. And Advent gives us hope to live faithfully for our King even though it means sacrifice in the midst of hardship, opposition, and even persecution. It’s easy to become complacent. It’s easy to slowly and gradually succumb to the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. It’s easy to lose sight of Jesus. It’s easy to forget that he is the beginning and the centre of all things as we were reminded last Sunday, and to start putting ourselves or our idols at the centre of things. It’s easy to lose

hope. And so the Church gives us Advent every year and we hear St. Paul’s voice like an alarm clock: “ Sleeper, awake!”

In the Epistle for the First Sunday in Advent he writes to the Christians in Rome, “You know what time it is. The hour has come. It’s time to wake from your sleep!” It seems that Paul borrowed this idea from an early Christian hymn that he quotes in Ephesians 5:14:

*Awake, O sleeper
And arise from the dead,
And Christ will shine on you.*

“The night is far gone, the day is at hand,” Paul writes here in Romans. It’s something we need to be reminded of. Jesus has died. Jesus has risen. The shockwave of new creation went out that first Easter. A new kingdom has been born. And yet the shockwave has passed. People have forgotten. The world trundles along and people continue to worship Caesar and Aphrodite and Mammon and Mars. We stopped going to their temples, but we continue to look for satisfaction or worth or security in the things they once represented—in power, in sex, in money, and in violence. And Paul shouts, “Wake up!” Brothers and Sisters, the new day has already dawned. The darkness is fading away. God’s new age is breaking in and driving away the darkness. It may just be the first few rays of light that are peeking over the horizon, but the resurrection of Jesus from the dead has inaugurated something new and, Paul says, that means that the people of Jesus need to wake up and live in the new day. The people around us might still be sleeping, but if Jesus truly is Lord as we proclaim, if we’ve really submitted to him in faith as we claim we have, then we need to get busy about living the life of his kingdom

Look at Romans 13:11-12. Paul writes:

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. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

The darkness of night is a good metaphor for the old age. It’s during the night, under the cover darkness, that people get away with all sorts of wickedness and evil. We do things in the dark that we’d be ashamed to do in broad daylight. Paul goes on in verse 13:

Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality...

Those are the sorts of things people do under the cover of darkness. Reading this, the Christians in Rome would have thought of the pagan temples. If you walked by at night you’d hear the drunken orgies and run into the people stumbling in and out of the temples. These were things the Gentile believers once did, but not anymore. And yet the present age isn’t *just* about those sorts of sins—the ones we often think of as “big sins”. Paul also adds **quarelling and jealousy** to the list. It’s easy for Christians, when we think of sins, to focus on the things that most of us avoid. I don’t know many Christians who participate in drunken orgies. Most of us are pretty good about sexual immorality—although that can often be something we get away with under the cover of darkness or—in the modern world—via the privacy and secrecy of the Internet. But Paul reminds us that there are other things too that should *never* characterise people who live in the light of Jesus’ kingdom—things that we see all too often in the Church and in our own lives.

A few years ago Jerry Bridges wrote a book titled *Respectable Sins*. (Some of you will remember that I used it as the basis for a series of sermons on

Sunday evenings just after I came here.) The focus of that book was on just these sorts of sins that Scripture condemns, but that are often ignored or, sometimes, even justified by Christians: things like anger and bitterness, jealousy and strife, unthankfulness and gossip and lack of self-control. It's easy to point our fingers at people engaged in sexual sin or at drunks and drug-users and to feel smug and self-righteous. And yet St. Paul lists many of these other sins like gossip and anger and enmity right along with those "big sins" when he writes about sinful behaviour and character that should never characterise Jesus' people. All of it, he says, needs to be put aside. All of these things are characteristic of the age that's passing away. All of these things are rooted in humanity's rebellion against God and against the vocation he gave us when he created us—all of them are centred on a love of self and an indulgence of self and that's not what Jesus' people are about. By his death and resurrection we've been liberated from the slavery of the old age and we've been given the life of the age to come, the life that God originally intended for us. Again, "Sleeper, awake!"

"But, Paul," we think, "that's all well and good, but how do we do that?" It's one thing for Paul to tell us not to do these things, but we've all tried and I don't know anyone who's been successful, at least not long-term, when they've tried it on their own. But, thankfully, Paul doesn't leave us with a bunch of impossible rules. He goes in verse 14:

But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

This is another principle that Paul writes about a lot. Over and over he tells us to *put off* the *old* and to *put on* the *new*. This is what Paul is saying when he says to cast off the works of darkness and instead to put on the armour of light. This is what we mean

when we use the word "repentance"—it means to cast aside, to turn away, and to put off everything that belongs to the age that's passing away, everything that belongs to our old selves, everything associated with our rebellion against God, and instead to turn to the light, to turn to Jesus and to let him fill us and clothe us with the life of God.

Brothers and Sisters, this is what Baptism is about. This is what it means to be "in Christ", as Paul so often puts it. This is what it means to live the life of the Spirit. It's about living out the new identity that Jesus has given us. Again, this is what it means to be baptised, but I think one of the most helpful ways to understand this is to think back to the story of the Exodus. Paul does that all the time so we might as well, too.

The Israelites were slaves in Egypt. That was their life. They laboured for Pharaoh until they died. But they knew the promises God had made to Abraham and they cried out to God. And God heard them. He sent Moses to lead them. He sent plagues to defeat Pharaoh and to prove his gods were powerless. And then he led the people miraculously through the waters of the Red Sea on dry ground, while drowning Pharaoh's army. He met the Israelites at Mt. Sinai and gave them his law—a new way to live—and he gave them his tabernacle—a place to encounter his presence. And then he led them into a new land. They were slaves, but he parted the sea and called them to meet him on the far side. And on the far side he gave them a new life and a new identity. At Sinai he declared that Israel was his son. That didn't mean that the Israelites ceased to struggle with their slave identity. When life was hard in the wilderness, Israel grumbled against the Lord and doubted his goodness and wisdom. Israel flirted with the idea of going back to Pharaoh. The fleshpots of Egypt were better than manna from heaven, or so they thought. Even after the Lord had

made good on his promise to bring them into the promised land, Israel failed to live in faith. With the Lord they had a covenant of life, but as Isaiah wrote in our Old Testament lesson, Israel chose instead to make a covenant with death.

Now, think of our baptism in light of that story. The baptismal font is our Red Sea. We are born slaves to sin and death, but in the baptismal waters, God holds out a promise to us: My Son has died for the forgiveness of sins. My Son was raised from death to begin the work of new creation. Trust in him. Trust in my promise. Kneel before him in faithful submission as Lord, and you will have a share in my new world. In other words: Repent and be baptised. Forsake everything but Jesus and he will deliver you from your old life of slavery to sin and death and give you the life God created us for. We pass through the waters and Jesus makes us new. He ushers us into a new land, a new kingdom, a new life.

Now, here's where the two stories parallel each other, but are very different. On the other side of the Red Sea, the Lord gave Israel his law. You are my son, he said. This is how you will serve me. But Israel failed to do it, because the people still had the same old hearts. The Lord promised through the prophets that he would do something new—something to fix Israel's heart problem—and he has done that in Jesus. Jesus leads us through the waters as Moses led Israel, but on the other side, Jesus gives us his own Spirit. This was the one thing Israel lacked. And God's Spirit turns our hearts of stone to hearts of flesh. God's Spirit transforms the desires of our hearts. From love of self and sin, he turns us to love for God and love for each other. In our baptism we put off the old and put on the new. In baptism we forsake the darkness and choose, by the power of God, to live in the light Jesus' dawning day.

Martin Luther wrote that when he was tempted by sin, when he was tempted to question God's forgiveness, or question the life of Jesus in him he would grab his forehead, the place where the water had been poured on him as a baby, and he would simply remind himself, "You are baptised!" I framed my baptismal certificate and hung it on the wall as a reminder to me. Those of you who are younger may have candles. Light them every year on the anniversary of your baptism to remind yourselves that you have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. The water of Baptism embodies the grace of God to forgive sinners and to clothe us with the life of Jesus, to make us new. If we have passed through these waters in faith there is nothing short of our own wilful rejection of God's promise that can separate us from the love of God, from his grace, from his forgiveness, or from his life. This is where we put off the old and put on Jesus.

But baptism is just the beginning. Jesus also reminds us and assures us of our life in him when we come to his Table. His body was broken and his blood was shed to make us holy. All who have passed through the waters of Baptism are invited to his Table to be reminded again that his life is our life, that in our Baptism we have put on Jesus, and that each day he sustains us, renews us, and transforms us. If you've been tempted during the week to put the old back on, you have a reminder here at the Lord's Table of what God has done for you in Jesus, of his love for sinners, and his invitation to once again put off the old and to put on the new. Here we participate once again those great events whereby Jesus led us out of our bondage to sin and death. Here at the Table Jesus *also* gives us a foretaste of the age to come and of his kingdom. Here he reminds us of his goodness and faithfulness. Here he reminds us that God's new creation is breaking in and if we are part of it, our lives ought to reveal its light. When we go from the

Table it should be in faith, knowing that Jesus is Lord, not Caesar, not Mammon, not Aphrodite, not any other false god we're prone to worship or look to for security—Jesus is Lord and Jesus alone. The Sacraments remind us that Jesus is the beginning and the centre of everything and the Lord's Table should be a place for us to evaluate how we've been living and to reorient ourselves back around him when we've started to put ourselves at the centre.

God gives us these means of grace because he understands the struggle we face. And the Sacraments certainly aren't the only means of grace. He's given us his Word and we would struggle a great deal less if we truly steeped ourselves in it and grasped better what it tells us and shows us of God's love and God's goodness and God's faithfulness. We'd struggle less if we meditated on and memorized God's Word, internalizing it and letting it shape and mould our desires and our thinking. And God gives us each other, his Church. Brothers and Sisters, Jesus has poured the Holy Spirit into each of us and he's put us in fellowship with one another. Together we teach and exhort each other, we love each other, we mourn and are joyful with each other, we're accountable to each other, we stand with each other. Again, God knows that we struggle to put off the old and to keep off the old. He knows that we struggle to put on the new and keep on the new. And so he gives us means of grace. We need to avail ourselves of them. That's part of what it means to wake up and to walk in the light.

This is how we live in this in-between time. The old age is passing away and God's new age is breaking in. We can only live in that new age, in God's kingdom by faith—faith in God's faithfulness, faith that as he has always been faithful to his promises. He will be faithful to his promise to make all things new, to restore his Creation, and to set everything to

rights. Paul looks forward to that day. And in the meantime, in this in-between time, we're called to live as if that day were already here. The first part of our Epistle shows us what that looks like. Look at Romans 13:8-10:

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.

Here's what kingdom living looks like. In fact, it looks just like what Jesus describes in the Sermon on the Mount. Don't owe anyone anything. Just at face value that's good and biblical advice, but where we're prone to reading this as Paul talking about the financial debt that's so common in our world—and that's often a symptom of our idolatry and our love of "things" and "stuff"—what Paul was really getting at was the system of patronage that governed almost every aspect of life in the ancient world. Their societies were strictly hierarchical and the way you found security and the way you advanced and the way you got rich was through patronage and debts. Few people did anything for anyone without expecting something in return. Think of the Mafia. The boss does you a favour, he looks out for you, he protects you, but he always expects something in return—and it's like that with everyone all the way down the hierarchy. It's a modern vestige of the old Roman system of patronage. Their entire world ran that way.

But Jesus' kingdom is the opposite. Jesus tells us to love our enemies and to do good to those who hate us. Jesus tells us to go the extra mile and to turn the other cheek. Jesus turns the values of the old age upside-down. In fact,

what he's *really* doing is turning the world right-side up after we rebelled and turned it upside down. And so this is why Paul urges us: Don't try to find your place in the present age, don't try to advance yourself in the present age by seeking to put others in your debt or by putting yourself in debt to the world's system, *just love each other*. Think of yourself as being in debt to everyone, but not in debt to them the way the world thinks. Deal with everyone you know and everyone you meet as if you owe them a debt of love. If you live like that you won't be thinking of other people as lower than yourself or as undeserving of your love. If you love them the thought of killing them or hating them or stealing from them or being envious of them or gossiping about them won't even cross your mind. If you love them and see they have a nice house or nice clothes you'll be happy for them. If you see they're in need, you'll find a way to help.

If you love your neighbour, Paul says, you won't commit adultery with his wife or with her husband. This is where the English language gets us into trouble. Love is a great word, but we've given it far too many things to do in English. Love covers the selfless and sacrificial and giving love modelled by Jesus and pointed to here by Paul. It covers the sort of love that desires and seeks to do the best thing it can for a friend or a neighbour—or even an enemy. But our English word for love also does duty for the selfish pursuit of our own lusts and desires that uses the people around us and that often destroys them. We do have words for that sort of selfishness. "Lust" is one of them. And yet when someone—as it's so often put—falls head-over-heels in love with someone else's husband or wife or when a young unmarried couple decides to have sex we avoid the word "lust". They're so attractive or beautiful and our feelings are so exciting and warm—well—then it must be "love". And then we justify it: God does say

that love is really all that matters, doesn't he?

But, Brothers and Sisters, that's not love. I've counselled people or even had people who know that as a Christian or as a pastor I must disapprove of what they're doing try to justify themselves with this sort of talk. "Yes, she's married to someone else, but we love each other." "Yes, we're both men, but we love each other." "No, we're not married, but we love each other." And I should add, it's not just about sex. I've heard gossips tearing down someone else justify it with just this sort of twisted language: "Oh, I wasn't gossiping, I care about So-and-so and I was telling my friends so that they could pray for her." Dear Friends, Paul makes short work of these kinds of arguments. The point of love, the kind of love that reflects the love of God, the kind of love embodied in that Greek word *agape* that Paul uses here, is the sort of love that reflects the love of God in Jesus. It's the sort of selfless love that seeks not our own satisfaction, but the good and well-being and wholeness of others. This is the love embodied in the Incarnation and the Cross—the love of the one who, though God, did not see that as something to be exploited, but emptied himself and humbly took on our flesh and who died the humiliating and excruciating death of the Cross—and not for his friends, but for his enemies; for the very people who put him there. Brothers and Sisters, that's love. As Paul writes, love does not wrong a neighbour. Love does no hurt to a neighbour. Instead, love seeks what is best for him—even if it means we come up short ourselves. And in that, Paul says, the law is fulfilled. In that we love not only our neighbours as ourselves, but in that we also show our love for God. It's through love that we live the life of God's kingdom and of his new creation, right here and right now as we wait for its fulfilment in future. It's through love that we declare to the world that Jesus is Lord. It's through love that we rouse the

world from its dark slumber to live in God's new day. Brothers and Sisters, this is Advent. We love as our Lord and Saviour first loved us and in that we proclaim: the King has come and the King will return.

Let us pray: Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both 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 for ever. *Amen*.