

Although I mentioned it last week, let us be again reminded that on the 25th Sunday after Trinity, we are instructed by the prayer book rubrics to use the propers from the 6th Sunday after Epiphany. And I remind us also that the Epiphany season is all about the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, the manifestation of Christ to the world. Looking at the collect today, we note this Epiphany theme up front which begins, “O GOD, whose blessed Son was manifested... .”

In fact, today’s Collect is derived from our reading from the First Epistle General of St. John. This is a great example of how inspired scripture has been arranged by the prayer book authors, in this case likely Bishop Cosin (d. 1672), to be used for worship and prayer. This collect gives us two primary purposes for why Christ became incarnate. The first is that He would destroy the works of the devil, of the dark spiritual forces that have set themselves up in opposition to Him. The second reason given for Christ’s first coming is so that He would make us, those who are united to Christ by faith, the Sons of God. Christ conquers both in the spiritual realm and in our physical realm. The powers of Satan have been bound, and we who were far off now may draw near to Christ.

In the collect these two themes are noted as already being accomplished. Christ already has destroyed the works of the devil, *and* Christ already has made us sons of God and heirs of everlasting life. Yet this is not the end of the story. We continue in our sonship, as it were, to be refined and purified towards Christlikeness. And the devil and all demons still do their level best to draw us away from the Truth of God and will continue to influence when and where they can, until Christ comes again, as the collect says, “in power and great glory,” bringing a close to the end of this age. Once again, we see in this collect, as well as in our epistle of course, the refrain, “We have been saved. We are being saved. We will be saved.”

This is clear when we look at the epistle. In it St. John writes, “Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure.” So we are the sons of God now, and daily we are to continue in purifying ourselves to be like Christ, and we shall one day realize the completion of that sanctifying process when Christ returns.

During this past Trinity season, we have been focused upon the task that is now set before us as believers. We have been trying to understand sin and purge it from our lives. If we love Christ, we must desire and embody a proactive faith. We do something about it. We attend corporate worship. We develop a robust devotional life. We embrace a ministry of some sort. We witness to others. We learn to lovingly submit to those in authority over us in whatever capacity that may be. We learn to love God with all our heart, mind, and soul. We learn to love our neighbor as ourselves. This is our work, now.

In this passage we see a future emphasis as well. When Christ returns, when we see Him as He is, then we shall be like Him. The salvation begun in our baptisms will be completed at His appearing. We will be fully, what we had already been made, sons of God. We will no longer need to suppress our sinful and selfish impulses for the old sin nature which we currently battle against will have been purged away, and we will be pure and holy.

The manifestation of Christ, therefore, is key in this collect and in the epistle. His first appearing brought an end to the first age. His second appearing will bring an end to this present age and usher in the Eschaton – the end. The gospel lesson this morning from St. Matthew 24 shows to us Christ appearing in power and great glory. Now we do not have time to go into the nitty gritty of this entire passage, but it is riddled with eschatological

imagery. Eschatology is the study of the end things. It asks the questions, “What do the end times look like?” and, “What are the events at the end of this world?”

Now there are many different understandings and arguments about how this world will end. Let me simplify these all for you for there are three credal issues – that we confess in the creeds. First, we confess that we believe in the second coming of Christ. Christ came the first time as Savior, and He will return as Judge. Second, we confess that we believe in the Resurrection of the Body. All people will be resurrected with bodies in the next world. Third, we confess that we believe in the final judgment. Christ is the judge. Some will be judged righteous in Christ. But there will be those who are condemned. We don’t want to be with them. We want to be with Jesus.

Now the language of eschatology is what we think of as apocalyptic. Many symbols and dramatic events are portrayed in such readings, and we read some of this in the New Testament lesson. My personal view is called partial preterism which means that I believe that most of the specific events described in our lesson have taken place. I do not believe, however, that the second coming has taken place, though there are some who do believe this who are called full preterists. Phew! That was a close one! I’m sure you are all breathing a sigh of relief that I am not a full preterist!

Now we will eventually do a study on eschatology in which we look at the different perspectives that are out there. But this morning we are just very very briefly going to look at one of these images to understand that these events are not necessarily literal, but are symbolic of a greater spiritual reality. And just because these events have taken place, this does not mean that we should not overlay Christ’s future Advent with His past Advent. A key notion here is that I understand the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD to be Christ’s

judgment upon the old Jewish temple system associated with His first Advent. This doesn't exclude His second coming from being similar. In fact, our prayer book compilers made this very conclusion for they couple these two passages together.

St. Matthew 24:29 reads, "Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken." Here we see references to the Sun, Moon, and Stars. We moderns go outside and see these heavenly bodies still in the sky, and we think, "Oh, there they are. So Jesus words in Matthew 24:29 haven't been fulfilled." However, what we really need to do is to return to our Old Testament and see how these physical elements are used there. That reading must inform our reading of the New Testament.

So let's start at the very beginning. (...a very good place to start.) In Genesis 1:14-18 we see that God made the Sun, and the Moon, and the Stars and set them in heaven to rule over the day and over the night and they are given for signs and seasons and days and years, and to divide light from darkness. For the rest of the Holy Scripture, the Sun, Moon, and Stars represent for us earthly rulers and the spiritual power behind those rulers. Therefore when Christ speaks of these heavenly bodies falling from the sky, these are symbols for the overthrow of the temporal ruling powers and for the animating spiritual darkness behind those rulers. This language symbolizes the end of one epoch and the birth of a new order. As Christians, we confess that Christ is King over all things. We here at this parish should be reminded of that every time we mention our parish name. Christ is THE King!

"But Fr. Kent," you might say, "you can't derive all of that from just that reference in Genesis." This is a fine objection, so let us see if this language is used in other places.

The Prophet Isaiah in chapter 13 spoke of the fall of Babylon to the Medes. He writes:

9 Behold, the day of the LORD comes,
Cruel, with both wrath and fierce anger,
To lay the land desolate;
And He will destroy its sinners from it.
10 For the stars of heaven and their constellations
Will not give their light;
The sun will be darkened in its going forth,
And the moon will not cause its light to shine.

The Prophet Amos similarly prophesied about Samaria in chapter 8:

9 “And it shall come to pass in that day,” says the Lord GOD,
“That I will make the sun go down at noon,
And I will darken the earth in broad daylight;

Likewise, the Prophet Ezekiel in chapter 32 prophesied about the fall of Egypt:

7 When I put out your light,
I will cover the heavens, and make its stars dark;
I will cover the sun with a cloud,
And the moon shall not give her light.
8 All the bright lights of the heavens I will make dark over you,
And bring darkness upon your land,”
Says the Lord GOD.

Now these prophecies were not literally fulfilled if that means that the Sun, Moon, and Stars, have to fall out of the sky. They were fulfilled in that the power structures of these nations got their lights knocked out. What Jesus is prophesying, therefore, in Matthew 24 is not that the heavenly bodies will literally be extinguished, but that the power structure in place in Jerusalem of His day, will crumble and be replaced with that of a new kingdom, the Kingdom of God with Christ as its ruler. In Christ, the old order, along with the evil and rebellious

spirits behind that order, was ended. This is why St. Luke in Acts 2 sets this language of judgment from the prophet Joel adjacent to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost:

17 'And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God,
That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh;
Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
Your young men shall see visions,
Your old men shall dream dreams.

18 And on My menservants and on My maidservants
I will pour out My Spirit in those days;
And they shall prophesy.

19 I will show wonders in heaven above
And signs in the earth beneath:
Blood and fire and vapor of smoke.

20 The sun shall be turned into darkness,
And the moon into blood,
Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD.

21 And it shall come to pass
That whoever calls on the name of the LORD
Shall be saved.'

Where does this leave us all this morning? First, even though specific instances of prophecy have been fulfilled, we must understand that the pattern of judgment associated with Christ's comings, with the Day of the Lord, as scripture puts it, is overlaid upon all worldly events in time. In His first coming, God entered our world as a babe, He suffered and died, He rose again for our salvation, our justification, and He now rules over all, judging the old order, destroying the works of the devil, and ushering in the Kingdom of God. In other words, the pattern of His first coming overlays the pattern of His second coming. In both Advents, He vindicates and purifies the faithful and judges those who do not heed His call. He came to us in humility as a precious gift, and then as King, He came in judgment. Having been exalted to rule at the right hand of the Father, be assured that He will come again in power and glory,

again rightly judging the world.

In our lessons this morning, you are correct to hear echos of the Season of Advent, the season of Christ's coming. Christ has come, Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. Throughout our lives, therefore, let us prepare to receive Him when He appears in power and great glory.

However, let us not be ignorant that Christ comes to us every time we gather to celebrate the Eucharist. Now whenever Christ appears, He brings judgment. Therefore, let us judge ourselves, always being quick to confess our sins and to receive forgiveness, so that we may come in a worthy manner to receive Him. But also let these symbols of Christ's presence bring comfort to us that we are indeed very members of His mystical body, the Church. Christ Jesus, the King of All, of both the seen and the unseen, loves you! God grant us the grace and the faith to purify ourselves as He is pure.

"We know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is." We pray, Lord, as You now appear here to us in these symbols of bread and wine, that we would indeed be made like You.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.