

Sermon for Morning Prayer
The Sunday Next Before Advent
(Trinity XXIV, 2009)

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-third Verse of the fourth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.

“. . . I beheld the earth, and, lo, it was without form, and void; and the heavens, and they had no light. I beheld the mountains, and, lo, they trembled, and all the hills moved lightly. I beheld, and, lo, there was no man, and all the birds of the heavens were fled. I beheld, and, lo, the fruitful place was a wilderness, and all the cities thereof were broken down at the presence of the LORD, and by his fierce anger. For thus hath the LORD said, The whole land shall be desolate; yet will I not make a full end. For this shall the earth mourn, and the heavens above be black: because I have spoken it, I have purposed it, and will not repent, neither will I turn back from it. The whole city shall flee for the noise of the horsemen and bowmen; they shall go into thickets, and climb up upon the rocks: every city shall be forsaken, and not a man dwell therein. And when thou art spoiled, what wilt thou do? Though thou clothest thyself with crimson, though thou deckest thee with ornaments of gold, though thou rentest thy face with painting, in vain shalt thou make thyself fair; thy lovers will despise thee, they will seek thy life. For I have heard a voice as of a woman in travail, and the anguish as of her that bringeth forth her first child, the voice of the daughter of Zion, that bewaileth herself, that spreadeth her hands, saying, Woe is me now! for my soul is wearied because of murderers.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the first thirty-first Verse of the twenty-fifth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.

“When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye

blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

This morning, I am going to use two texts, one from each of the Lessons appointed for today. First, from the First Lesson: “I beheld, and, lo, the fruitful place was a wilderness, and all the cities thereof were broken down at the presence of the LORD, and by his fierce anger.”

And, from the Second Lesson: “When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats....”

In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

Each of these two passages refers to the same event, but their very different descriptions of it are the results of the fact that each of them approaches that event from a rather different perspective. Of course, it is only natural for those two perspectives to differ, because Jeremiah wrote in Old Testament times, with the expectation of the coming of the Messiah but with no inkling whatever that the Messiah for whom he waited was in fact to be God's final Revelation of Himself to mankind, in the form of His taking on Human flesh to walk among us and share fellowship with us here on earth.

St. Matthew, on the other hand, wrote in New Testament time, immediately after that Revelation took place, and while the Church, the New Israel, was in the process of assimilating and coming to grips with the new reality that the prophecies and expectations of the Old Israel had just been fulfilled.

Theme:

The particular event, to which both Jeremiah and St. Matthew are here testifying, is, of course, what we often call the "Second Coming" of Our Lord. Some have suggested it really should be called His "Third Coming", because His birth at Bethlehem was His first appearance upon earth in a human body and His Resurrection upon Easter, three days after His death on Good Friday, was the second.

But, regardless of how one counts those appearances, as Christians we await His coming again, as the wise and foolish virgins awaited the bridegroom's coming to the wedding feast.

Development:

- 1. Jeremiah's image of Our Lord's Second Coming depicts the devastation that is expected to follow the "winding up" of the business of the physical universe.**

Sometimes, one sees bumper stickers that say something like, "When the Rapture comes, this car will be empty." Aside from the rather breath-taking presumption displayed by the assumption that the buyer of the sticker will certainly be among those caught up into heaven, this displays a distinct confusion of fact. It

misunderstands the ancient Hebrews' – and therefore the first Christians' – tendency toward poetic metaphor and takes that metaphorical streak for the cool, descriptive factuality of a traveller's itinerary.

What we should be taking away from Jeremiah's depiction of the devastation of the artifacts and indicia of urban civilization is the realization that the very culture that was developed to support and cradle our search for God will have fulfilled its purpose, and thus will have become obsolete and even otiose, when God comes again to call us to Him for the final time.

To say, "the fruitful place was a wilderness, and all the cities thereof were broken down" is to depict in poetic terms the falling to ruin and obsolescence of all the creations of man, with a suggestion in the words "at the presence of the LORD, and by his fierce anger" of what will become the Christian doctrine of the General Judgement that is set out in each of the three historic Creeds.

As the Apostles' Creed says: "He ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty: From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead."¹

As the Nicene Creed says, "He ... ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of the Father: And he shall come again, with glory [that is, "in divine power"], to judge both the quick and the dead...."

And as the Athanasian Creed has it, "He ascended into heaven, he sitteth on the right hand of the Father, God Almighty: from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead."

2. St. Matthew's image of Our Lord's Second Coming depicts the process of each person's being called to give an account of his or her life here on earth.

Where Jeremiah, the prophet of the Old Covenant, concentrates on the obsolescence and decay of the physical world, St. Matthew, as the chronicler of the New one emphasizes Our Lord's rôle in judging all those who have lived in that world. This is clearly shown in the words, "the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: And

before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats....”

Or, as the Athanasian Creed puts it, “At whose coming all men shall arise again with their bodies: and shall give account for their own works. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting: and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.”

The rest of the passage from St. Matthew is highly instructive, because it also clearly sets forth some of the most important among the standards upon which each of us will be judged. The specific instances cited are all matters of maintaining physical life: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, and sheltering the homeless. Obviously, then, this is something like a *synecdoche* [**si-NECK-deh-key**], that is, a rhetorical figure in which these particular instances stand for the broader principle of caring for God’s beloved people and giving them the means of life in general.

Conclusion:

So as we consider the approaching season of Advent – or, as we might put it, prepare for a time of preparation – we must never forget that “Advent”, or “the Coming”, is itself a time of preparation. So we might actually say that now, in “pre-Advent”, we prepare to prepare to prepare.

This is because the Birth of Our Lord, which we will celebrate on Christmas and toward which the Advent season ostensibly looks, is itself merely looking toward Our Lord’s Last Coming.

If you saw one of the recent television movies about the British Navy in the age of sail, such as C. S. Forester’s “Hornblower” series or Patrick O’Brien’s “Master and Commander”, you saw that the old sailors spent much time looking through old-fashioned refracting telescopes, carefully examining the sea around them to get early warning of the coming near of anything important.

Such a telescope is an optical system with two lenses. Outside the telescope itself, and at some distance away, is the object to be viewed. At the far end of the telescope mechanism, but much nearer than that object, is the “objective lens”, which collects the light arriving from the object being viewed. At the near end of

the tube is the “eyepiece” lens, into which the observer. The system focuses the incoming light rays so they may be picked up and understood by the observer’s eye which, once again, is actually outside the telescope’s mechanism.

If I may borrow one of these old telescopes as a metaphor, the Christian who is beginning the journey into the Advent season is the observer. The Advent season itself is the eyepiece, which helps to bring into focus the light that is collected for us by Our Lord’s Incarnation at Christmas, which is, of course, the objective lens in our telescope which collects the available information and impressions. And Our Lord’s Last Coming is the object we are ultimately seeking, by the help of these things, to see and understand.

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*The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister
November 22, 2009.*

ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year (1943),
THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xl (PECUSA 1928/1943).*

ⁱ *Jeremiah 4:23-31 (KJV).*

ⁱ *St. Matthew 25:31-46 (KJV).*

ⁱ *Jeremiah 4:26 (KJV).*

ⁱ *St. Matthew 25:31-32a (KJV).*

ⁱ *St. Matthew 25:1-13 (KJV).*

ⁱ *The Apostles’ Creed, in The Order for Daily Morning Prayer,
THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 15*

(The Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. 1928, 1943).

ⁱ *Ibid., 16.*

ⁱ *Quicumque Vult, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 23
(Church of the Province of South Africa 1954).*

ⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱ *Priest Assistant, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, Metairie LA. Honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection, and Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.*