

The End of All Things. And Stewardship.

The Second Sunday in Advent

December 10, 2023

Luke 21:25–36

Christmas and Easter. Those are the big ones. There are other high festivals of course of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Church Year. But those are the two that stand out above all the rest. Those are the ones on which everything revolves. If Christ has not been born and if He has not been raised then our faith is in vain and we have no hope. Those are the ones of the greatest joy and the ones we most look forward to. Those are the ones we anticipate and prepare for. Those are the ones that in the Church Year are preceded by seasons of reflection and preparation. For Easter it is Lent and for Christmas it is Advent. This is why as the world is already in the Christmas spirit we are taking time in the Church for meditation and repentance and anticipation. When the actual celebration of Christmas on Christmas Day comes it will be joyous!

As we are making our way through Advent we are learning something else about what we are preparing for. In the Gospel reading today our Lord is speaking of His second coming, when He will return on the last day. When He will once again come in the flesh but this time in glory. Jesus' words have an Advent sense about them, He is giving them to us to help us prepare. He speaks of the signs of the end. He tells us beforehand what will happen so that we are ready. In Advent we are preparing not only for our celebration of our Lord's birth but also of our celebration on the day when He comes again.

On this day there's also something else that we as a Christian congregation are observing. It is Commitment Sunday, what some churches call Stewardship Sunday. There are many Scripture readings that teach of the proper use of money and how we make use of our time and abilities. But the readings for the Second Sunday in Advent serve us well as they place stewardship in its proper context.

In fact, it was a stewardship sermon by Jesus that prompted His great discourse on the end of all things. His little sermon on stewardship was something more like an object lesson. What brought it all about was He and His disciples observing people putting their offerings into the temple treasury. Our method is a little different, where we put our money in offering envelopes and place them into the offering plate. The way it was done back then was that people would drop their coins into a receptacle. Some wanted others to know how good of followers of God they were by making a display of their giving large amounts of money into the treasury. But then there was this one widow who was poor who dropped in two small coins. You can almost here the faint clink in contrast to the clanging sounds of the many coins of those obviously more religious leaders.

But Jesus puts stewardship firmly into perspective when He says that she put in more than all of them. How is this so when they clearly gave a much larger amount than she did? It is more, Jesus explains, because she gave a large percentage of her money and they, though giving a large amount, gave only a small percentage of their income. Giving to God has nothing to do with how much or how little of an amount you give and everything to do with how large or how small of a percentage you give to Him. They, He says, gave out of their abundance, she out of her poverty.

Jesus then places even fuller perspective on stewardship when the disciples' attention is turned to the temple itself and the impressive stones of the building. Jesus says, "Do you see all these stones? Not one of them will be left standing." The temple was a special place. It was holy, dedicated to God. And yet Jesus is showing them that it is at the end of the day made up of ordinary things that will come to an end. This church we're in is not any different. There will come a day when this church building, along with everything else, will no longer be standing.

And this is just it. Our world is full of things. The universe is made up of things. To be sure, these are good things. When God created everything He declared that it is all good. And with God, good is perfect. So we can rightly enjoy the good things God has given us. He has given them to us for this purpose. But we also need to recognize that since we have fallen into sin these things will come to an end. The new creation God has prepared for us will be far greater than any and all of the things we have in this life. The perspective Jesus gives us is, “Do you see all of these things? They will not be here at some point. They will all come to an end.” So let us not get caught up in things.

He then launches into the signs of the end that is to come. These are frightening. “There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars; and there will be anguish on the earth among nations bewildered by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and expectation of the things that are coming on the world, because the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” People will be afraid. But isn’t this what we already see happening? Already people are in fear of what is going on in the world.

But we do not have to fear. Jesus says two remarkable things about the end. “But when these things begin to take place, stand up and lift your head, because your redemption is near.” We too often get caught up in the ways of the world, as He describes, where our minds are dulled “from carousing, drunkenness, and worries of life.” We are not to live that way. We are to be ready. We are to live in light of eternal realities. The things of this world are just things and they will come to an end. But we will live forever. The second remarkable thing He says, then, is that on that last day when He returns, we will be able to stand before Him. We will stand before Him in joy.

Advent is all about preparation. Stewardship is all about how we live. How do we go about this? There are two things we pray when we have partaken of Holy Communion which set our focus where it ought to be. We pray the prayer Simeon prayed when he held the baby Jesus in the temple, the *Nunc Dimittis*: “Lord, now let Your servant depart in peace according to Your word, for mine eyes have seen Your salvation.” This prayer serves to bid us go from here in peace, having beheld in bread and wine the very Savior Simeon held in his arms. But it is much more than that. Simeon was praying to God that he could now depart from this earth in peace. We too are now ready to depart this earth when our Lord bids us home.

We pray also: “We give thanks to You, almighty God, that You have refreshed us through this salutary gift, and we implore You that of Your mercy You would strengthen us through the same in faith toward You and in fervent love toward one another.” We have been refreshed with the body and blood of Christ, this gift of salvation. We pray that He would use His body and blood to strengthen us to use all the things God has given us in this life in faith toward Him and in fervent love toward one another. The end of all things is near. It is at the end of days or at the end of your days. You do not know when Christ will return or when you will die. But He has given you not only the many temporal blessings you have in this life but also eternal life and so you are ready. Amen.

SDG

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