

## The First Sunday in Advent

Watch and Pray

Luke 21:25-36

Advent marks the start of the Christian calendar. It's a time of preparation, not simply preparing for Christmas and trying to avoid the so-called 'silly season' of the year end functions, but preparing our hearts and lives in anticipation of the return of Christ. For return he will, not in the manner of his first coming, incognito born in humility, rather his return will be dramatic and majestic.

Highly descriptive words are used in Scripture to depict the return of Jesus. Pictorial language sets the scene, designed to capture our imagination and attention, rather than providing mere factual information by way of a chronological blue print of what we will see when it happens. Three words by way of theological shorthand are noteworthy in this regard:

- i. *parousia*, the word means 'presence' or 'arrival' in connection with a royal visit. We live in expectation of a royal visit by our living and risen Saviour.
- ii. *apocalypse*, literally an unveiling of Jesus. At the moment his majesty and dominion are veiled. On that Great Day the veil will be drawn aside and the whole world will see Jesus as he truly is.
- iii. *epiphany*, an unmistakable appearance. "We wait for the blessed hope – the appearing of the glory of our God and Saviour, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13)

The first coming of Jesus was a real presence, lowly and humble. He came in obscurity, hidden, anonymous. He came in poverty, homeless, oppressed and weak. He came in pain, shame, dishonour, rejection and death on the cross. "He made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Phil 2:7). But when he returns, he will come in glory. We will see him as he really is, the Saviour and Judge of the world. His glory will be that which God revealed at Mount Sinai (Exodus 20:16), the splendour which Isaiah saw in the temple (Isa 6), the transfigured presence which Peter, James and John momentarily saw on the mountain (Matt 17:2). He will come accompanied by events never seen since the first day of creation.

Luke's description of cosmic convulsions, heavenly bodies shaken (v26), signs in the sun, moon and stars requires sensitive interpretation. He is describing the indescribable. He is telling us things will never be the same again. He doesn't intend us to imagine the scene in advance. His language is like the trimmings at the dinner table. The real thing is the meal set before us, its taste and nutrition, not simply the decorative appearance. Similarly, the real thing is the return of Christ. The events surrounding his return are the trimmings. Please let's not get lost in debate and dispute over secondary matters like the extent and nature of the Millennium which is found in a single verse in Rev 20:6. This is a secondary matter, trimmings if you will, on which we respect freedom of opinion and interpretation.

The essential features of Christ's return are:

- i. personal      Acts 1:11      '... this same Jesus'
- ii. physical     Acts 1:11      '...will come back in the same way'
- iii. visible      Col 3:4      '...you also will appear with him'
- iv. sudden       1 Thess 5:2      '...like a thief in the night'
- v. triumphant    1 Thess 4:16      '...the trumpet call of God'

The practical implications are:

- i. hope           Titus 2:3      '...the blessed hope'
- ii. comfort       1 Thess 4:4      '...with the Lord forever'
- iii. holiness      1 Thess 3:13      '...blameless and holy when our Lord Jesus comes'
- iv. joy            1 Pet 1:18      '...joy unspeakable, full of glory'
- v. praise          Rev 5:13      '...to him who sits on the throne'

In short, we await the return of Jesus, our bags packed and ready, with expectant and joyful hearts.

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