

First Sunday of Advent (Dec. 1, 2013 and Nov. 27, 2016)

Isaiah 2:1-5

Psalm 122

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:36-44

“But of that day and hour, knoweth no man”

Our lessons today on this First Sunday of Advent encourage us to be a people who are “watching” and “ready” for the return of Christ the King. We make ready our plans for Christmas, and in doing so, we make ready to meet the incarnate Christ at Christmas. The prophets and apostles of the Bible tell us to be ready for his Comings. These spiritual leaders discern the workings of nature and of the political affairs of the nation and nations, and although they do not give us complete knowledge of the future, we can use their teachings to make good judgments about our lives and those of others. We make good judgements in preparation. We also make ready for Christ’s Second Coming, which Jesus speaks of as recorded in our Gospel reading. Whether Christ comes today, tomorrow or in eighty years, we can and should be ready, our Lord says. If may be our own deaths will occur before Christ’s Coming. We know not the hour of either Christ’s Second Coming or our deaths. But Jesus tells us to watch and be ready: “Watch therefore; for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.” Shakespeare, one of the pillars of our Anglican faith, summarizes this theology in the cryptic phrase in a couple of his plays, “The readiness is all.”

With The First Sunday of Advent, we begin a new church year. In our lectionary, we now will use the Gospel of Matthew as the main gospel throughout the year. The two main themes of Advent are the First and Second Comings of Christ, the First leading up to the birth of Jesus, the Second to Christ’s return at the end of time to be the triumphant ruler. In our daily lectionary devotions throughout Advent we read from Isaiah of the prophetic discernment of the future ruler in Christ; we also read from the book of Revelation of the final rule of Christ over earth and heaven. Our gospel today introduced those two Comings with readings on eschatology, having to do with the discernment of the signs of the time and how we should prepare for future hope of Christ’s Coming or Advent. Each of our four readings today cause us to look back at how well Christ’s First Coming was foretold and looks ahead in preparation of His Second Coming in the future. Let us briefly examine Isaiah and the Gospel.

Isaiah 2 shows the prophet Isaiah’s understanding of what is to take place in the future. Isaiah is writing in the eighth century BC, but in this prophesy he looks ahead to the future to a triumphant victory. Isaiah says that there are many mountains upon which to worship, many gods and goddesses that could be objects of devotion, but he says the mountain of the Lord’s house, that is, the Temple, shall be established in the top of the mountains. The elevation of God, figuratively, will be higher than the elevation of those nations and religions. And all nations shall flow unto the mountain of God. And many nations shall come and admit that they need to learn the ways of the God of Israel and learn to complete the laws that come forth out of Zion and the word of the Lord out of Jerusalem. This God will judge the nations and cause them to beat their swords in to plowshares and to learn peace. This phrase “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks” is engraved on the United Nations building in New York city, so you may have heard it or seen the sign before. But when will this happen; when does Isaiah say this will happen. Isaiah, in his book, is telling of the impending conquest of the Samaria by the

Assyrians, yet he looks to a second fulfillment further in the future where there will be a unity and peace amongst the nations as they rally around the mountain of Zion. Isaiah is prophecy of Christ's Second Coming. How can Isaiah be so astute? He knows that God would not generate a world without also providing leaders who can speak to the impending events of their day and the consequences of those events for some time in the future. The prophets in particular, but also priests and kings, have knowledge of what will take place and how we should prepare.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus instructs his disciples late in his ministry, that is, just prior to his final trial, that they must always be ready for the Second Coming of Christ because they do not in fact know when it is taking place. The times, as Jesus says, are like that of the time of Noah in which there is eating, drinking, marrying and so on, but finally Noah enters the ark and it starts to rain. The people of Noah's day were surprised at the reversal of their fortunes. Jesus says it will be so in his Second Coming. Two will be in a field and one taken. Two women will be grinding grain, one will be taken and the other left. Jesus says: if the master of the house had known when the thief would come, he would have prevented it. Jesus's conclusion: "Watch, therefore, for you know not the hour" and "be ye also ready". But in the context of the chapter, what immediately precedes is the exhortation to discern the times; Jesus says to learn from the parable of the fig tree. When the branch is tender and sends forth leaves, summer is nigh. So there are two teachings in the chapter, even teachings that are in opposition. Jesus says they should be like the prophets who judge well their lives, and the lives of others and the nation, and can discern what will take place; they have Divine wisdom of human nature and the manner of God's governance. But Christ teaches them that part of this Divine wisdom is knowing that there are limitations of speculation on the end times. Contrary to so much "otherworldly-speculation" in recent time – Jesus was supposed to coming in 1987 – and on what heaven will be like and when it will burst forth upon earth, let us use this prophetic wisdom to discern the nature of our worlds and of our responsibility to make the best judgments about our lives and the lives of others. Jesus teaches us only to be ready. Because God governs the world, he sends leaders, prophets, priests, and kings, to lead his people aright. It is our responsibility to support the wisdom and guidance they provide for us. Advent is a time of taking stock of ourselves, of preparing, for God is coming, in Christ, to our lives. Are we ready? As we prepare for the giving of Christmas presents, for visits to family and friends, let us also prepare to meet God in all his glory, both as a Christ child and in the future as a victorious King.