

A homily for the 2nd Sunday of Advent, December 6, 2009. St. Ignatius Church.
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Advent means coming and if you ask a child who is coming, he will give one of two answers: Santa, or Jesus. Maybe both. Perhaps we should hear the skepticism of a 10 year old who said, “What’s this all about! I though he came, 2000 years ago.”

And so he did. It is a very old birthday we celebrate at Christmastime, and it has become surrounded—some would say, overwhelmed—with all kinds of merrymaking and myth. For the most part this is quite all right! In our present world situation we need a holiday and a holy day to celebrate God’s gift to us. Of himself.

But there is another coming the church tries to stress in Advent. Not Bethlehem but the end of the world and the return of Christ in triumph. This is doctrine but there are some problems with it I would like to sort out. Much of the biblical language that predicts the end, the final times, is expressed in frightening apocalyptic language such as you heard last week, and can read in Matthew, Mark and Luke. And also in a confusing book of the Bible called Apocalypse or Revelation. Scholars say we really don’t know the author, and it’s written in bad Greek. Nonetheless it gives some wonderful titles for Mary and Christ.

But here is a major point: There is no talk of Second Coming in John’s gospel. Why not? Because the gospel was written much later, about 100 AD, and the believers, called the community of John, were convinced that Jesus had already come. Or returned. They believed (as we do) that he is present to us now, spiritually but a real presence, so real that St. Paul could say, “I live now. No, not I, but Christ in me.”

There is an anguished question or conundrum posed by the Jewish scholar to his Christian friend: If the world is so badly off, why has the Messiah not come?” And the Christian’s comment: “We believe he did come, but why, then, is the world so badly off?

We have to answer this personally by making the world less badly off—by living the Christian life. Every day. In every way. By acts of goodness—justice, compassion and love. Especially love.

Another aspect of the Second Coming, the end of the world, is the belief of both Jews and Christians that this is the time of the final resurrection. In fact, a notable biblical scholar, the Anglican bishop, N.T. Wright, argues strongly that this is the only real resurrection, and a pleasant sleep, nothing more, awaits all those who die in the meantime. If you find this unappealing, so do I. I cannot match his knowledge of the Bible but I can quote Thomas Aquinas, the formidable intellect of the 13th century, and many more who assert that the souls of the just enjoy nothing less than the Beatific Vision when they die. Plato says the same thing about possessing the supreme Good. I would say that our life, our personality, is completed, not ended. The biblical scholar deplores all the gauzy images supposedly of heaven, sitting on golden clouds, strumming on harps, and all that. In this he is right. We should not try to imagine what is essentially a new creation.

Another scholar named Jeffrey Burton Russell has written a major book on this subject, and I review his thoughts in a lecture I hope to give here, after Easter. (I have given it in California, Chicago, and Dedham—it's time to come home!) I can give you right now the best of his thoughts in just four words: they are wonder, joy, gratitude, and love. Any one of these is the way to enter or apprehend even now the unspeakable glory we call heaven—which means God. The language used must be metaphoric. Language leaps, as Dante said, and his own great poem, *In Paradiso*, uses light, love, and the rose as metaphors.—“The greatest of these is love.” This is how a poet (Thomas Wolfe) answered the question, what happens when we die:

“To lose the earth you have for greater knowing,
to lose the life you have for greater love,
to lose the friends you have for greater loving,
to find a land more kind than home.”

This doesn't wait for us until the end of the world. God who gave us Jesus is more generous than that.