

Advent

by J.H. Newman

The sermon emphasizes the importance of preparing for the coming of Christ and living in accordance with the teachings of the Church.

Scripture: Malachi 3:1, Luke 19:11, John 13:34, Romans 13:11, 1 Corinthians 4:1, Philippians 4:5

Topics: "Second Coming", "Advent Preparation"

Description

J.H. Newman preaches about the season of Advent, which prepares us for both the celebration of Christ's first coming in the flesh and the anticipation of His second coming in glory to judge the living and the dead. The Church's services during Advent focus on awakening us from spiritual slumber, casting off darkness, and putting on the armor of light in preparation for Christ's return. Through reflections on Scripture, the role of ministers, and the call to love one another, we are reminded of our high duties, privileges, and responsibilities as members of the Christian Church until Christ's second coming.

Transcript

THE name Advent, which means Coming, is given to the four Sundays immediately before Christmas-day, the feast which celebrates our LORD'S coming in the flesh to suffer for us. This season, then, is set apart by the Church, in accordance with ancient and venerable usage, in the first place, to prepare the minds of her children, by holy meditation, for welcoming, with more devout and heartfelt joy, that great day, the day of CHRIST'S Nativity. But her services at this solemn time are also directed to another object, very closely connected with the former: viz. to lead our thoughts onward to that second coming of our LORD and Master "in His glorious Majesty to judge the quick and the dead," which the Church is still expecting and anxiously looking for. These two subjects are very closely blended in the services of this season, as indeed there is much naturally to unit them in our thoughts and feelings; for the promise of CHRIST'S second coming to us, what the hope of His first coming was to the Jews. And therefore, while we go back in our thoughts to the time when CHRIST appeared in the flesh, and to the state of the Jewish Church at that time, we must apply all to the searching out of our own spirits, whether we are like holy Simeon and Anna, and the faithful few who "waited for redemption in Jerusalem," or rather like the great mass of the people, who thought only of worldly and temporal things, and so rejected their King when he appeared among them. Let us here examine, what help the Church will give us in comparing our own privileges and condition with those of GOD'S ancient people.

The Collects for the Sundays in Advent, those at least for the first three Sundays, are very much formed upon the language of the Epistles, with more or less reference to the Gospels. It will be right, then, to look first to the Epistles, and from them try to learn, how, as members of the Christian Church, we are to prepare for the second awful coming of our Lord and Master.

We are awakened, then, in the Services of the first Sunday, by the warning voice of an Apostle, that "now it is high time to awake out of sleep;" that "the night is far spent, the day is at hand;" that we must therefore without delay, "cast off the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light." Just so the Jewish Church was awakened by one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of the LORD;" the message of John the Baptist was the same as the Apostles to us--"Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

He was to "turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just;" he was to be the Elias who was "to restore all things;" and accordingly the prophecy in which his mission was foretold, after vehement rebukes and warnings to the Jewish people, concluded with a solemn exhortation to them to "remember the law of" GOD'S "servant Moses, which he commanded in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and the judgments." (Mal. iv.) In like manner St.

Paul urges upon us the solemn Law which has been given to the Christian Church, the "new commandment," by which we shall be tried, when the messenger of the Covenant comes again to His Temple. The Apostle has been giving many precepts of Christian practice, (ch. xii, xiii.), but it seems as if he heard his Master's voice, "Behold, I come quickly," and so the more anxiously sounded in our ear the simple commandment which He left us, to "love one another." "He that loveth another hath fulfilled the Law--Love is the fulfilling of the Law.

And that, knowing the time; the day is at hand; let us therefore walk honestly as in the day, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the LORD JESUS CHRIST." And now, having seen and felt what CHRIST will seek for, when He comes into his temple, we may profit duly by the awful lesson which we learn in the Gospel. The Jews had long been looking impatiently for the promised Deliverer; (Mal. ii. 17. iii. 1.) and when they saw Him riding into Jerusalem, as the Prophet had foretold, they cried, saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the LORD; Hosanna in the highest!"

Meanwhile, what were the thoughts of the "meek and lowly" King? His forerunner had been despised, the Law of Moses had not been "remembered," the hearts of the fathers were not turned to the children, nor the hearts of the children to the fathers;--and He was now coming to "smite with a curse." (Matt. iv. 6.) And when he came near, He beheld the city and wept over it. He went into the temple and cast out the buyers and the sellers and the money-changers, as a type and signal of that still more fearful clearing of His Temple, when He laid Jerusalem even with the ground, and her children within her, and gave the privileges of His chosen to the Gentile world.

Such fearful vengeance was taken of those who "refused Him that spake on earth;" how then "shall we escape if we turn away from Him that speaketh from heaven?"--we, who have "received the kingdom which cannot be moved;" who are come not to Horeb, but unto Mount Sion, "unto the city of the living GOD, the heavenly Jerusalem." Surely it becomes us to listen to the affectionate warnings of the Church, as she awakens us from our slumber, and recounts our high duties and our inestimable privileges.

2. In the services of the Second Sunday we have the first great privilege of the Church brought before us, viz. that in the Church we have preserved to us those Holy Scriptures, in which is set before us "the blessed hope of everlasting life." "The promises made to the fathers" have now been fulfilled; and as they

"through patience and comfort of the Scriptures" had "hope" of CHRIST'S first coming, and through Him of life and immortality, so we, having the same sure word of prophecy, may look onward to the day of the Church's final redemption, and, anticipating that coming of CHRIST'S kingdom for which we daily pray, and that "life everlasting," in which we daily profess our belief, may "abound in hope through the power of the HOLY GHOST."

Meanwhile the influence which Holy Scripture is intended to have upon the Christian Church, is strikingly put before us in the context of the Epistle. St. Paul has been enforcing the duty of mutual forbearance by the argument of CHRIST'S example; "for even CHRIST pleased not Himself....Now the GOD of patience and consolation grant you to be like-minded one towards another, according to CHRIST JESUS; that ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify GOD, even the Father of our LORD JESUS CHRIST.

Wherefore receive ye one another, as CHRIST also received us, to the glory of GOD." The faith of the Holy Catholic Church, grounded upon GOD'S "Holy Word," is the bond of unity; a link which so binds together the congregation of the faithful every where, that there is but "one body and one spirit." And in that Christian Temple the worshippers so speak "as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the LORD"--the "Holy, Holy, Holy LORD GOD of Sabaoth"--that "the house is filled with a cloud," the special presence of the Great Author of Peace and Lover of Concord, "the Father of our LORD JESUS CHRIST, our only Saviour, the Prince of Peace."

And when we think of the deep and earnest tones of CHRIST'S last solemn prayer before He suffered, that the Church might be one in itself and in Him through the faith which He had given it; and then again remember, that the sentence of His judgment-seat, when He shall come the second time in His glory, will be grounded on the relation between Himself as the Head of the Church, and His brethren as its members,--a relation so close, that what has been done unto them, He considers as done unto Him, and what has been denied to them, as denied to Him; (St.

Matt. xxv.) we shall surely return with a feeling of deeper humiliation to the Church's Advent Prayer; that we may have "grace to cast off the works of darkness, and to put on the armour of light;" that so, when "He shall come again in His glorious Majesty to judge the quick and the dead," those Holy Scriptures, which were given to His Church for our learning, may not rise up in judgment against us for our neglect of that new and great commandment, the observance of which was to be the distinctive characteristic of His disciples.

3. But fresh privileges and responsibilities are brought before us in the services of the Third Sunday in Advent. For we have in the Church not merely "Holy Scriptures written for our learning," but "Ministers of CHRIST and Stewards of the mysteries of GOD," sent to prepare and make ready the way for His second coming, that we may then be found an acceptable people in His sight. We might have been left to derive from Scripture by our own unaided efforts its rich and glorious contents "for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness;" but our merciful FATHER has dealt otherwise with His Church under each dispensation.

For the Baptist, who heralded CHRIST at His coming, though "more than a prophet," was but the successor of a "goodly company," whom GOD had raised up from time to time to vindicate the Law and to foreshow the Gospel. "But he that is least in the kingdom of GOD is greater than he." The prophet of the ancient Church had for his main office to enforce the Law, to show GOD'S people their transgression and their sin; if he spoke of the Gospel, it was in prospect only, and seen afar off.

The Messengers sent to us are a "Ministry of reconciliation," Ministers and Stewards of the mysteries of redemption, with power and commandment, as ambassadors of CHRIST, to declare and pronounce to GOD'S people, being penitent, the blessed tidings of forgiveness, and in the preaching of His word and the distribution of His sacraments to convey and apply its benefits to each individual member of CHRIST'S Body. And does not this great blessing entail upon us a heavy responsibility?

Let us learn from the Church how such a gift should be received; she instructs us in the words of St. Paul's admonition to the proud and schismatical Church of Corinth. The Apostle bids them look upon himself and his fellow-labourers as Ministers of CHRIST, responsible to their own Master, and to be judged by Him alone; as men who thought it a very small thing that even their own consciences acquitted them, or that in man's judgment they were preferred and made the head of a party; who were stewards, and therefore required to be faithful to Him who gave them their commission; and who sought to have "praise" not of men but "of GOD," in that solemn day of His appearing, when He should "bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and make manifest the counsels of the heart."

And if we had imbibed more deeply St. Paul's spirit, we should less resemble than (it is to be feared) we sometimes do, the contentious Corinthians, or the multitudes who flocked to the wilderness to the Baptist's preaching, as if it had been some spectacle for idle curiosity. (Matt. xi.) Wisdom would be justified of all her children, even in our judgment; we should see them all to be Ministers and Ambassadors of GOD, and our commendations and censures would be turned into prayers on their behalf, such as the Church has taught us, that like the Baptist they may likewise so prepare and make ready CHRIST'S way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at His second coming to judge the world, we may be found an acceptable people in His sight. And in this way too, as well as in giving greater heed to His holy Word, we should better fulfil CHRIST'S commandment of love; for it was for this purpose that He commissioned the Ministers and Stewards of His word and sacraments.

St. Paul tells us, "He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of CHRIST; till we all come in the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the SON of GOD unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of CHRIST; that we henceforth be no more children tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, but speaking the truth in love, may grow up unto Him in all things which is the Head, even CHRIST; from whom the whole body, fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself

4. And now, having reviewed the privileges with which we are favoured in CHRIST'S Holy Church until His coming again, we are solemnly warned in the Epistle of the fourth Sunday, as before first of His near approach: "The LORD is at hand." And if we indeed lived answerably to our privileges as members of CHRIST'S Church and household, we should be able to await the fulfilment of the promise in the spirit of calm confidence and joy, which St. Paul describes in the verses that follow; "the peace of GOD which passeth all understanding," keeping our hearts and minds by CHRIST JESUS.

The passage which is chosen for the Gospel, places us at the point of time when CHRIST was on the eve of appearing as "the Lamb of GOD which taketh away the sin of the world." He had been baptized, and was now turning from the wilderness; for it was "the next day," we read, that the Baptist pointed Him out to the notice of His disciples. He was already standing among them, though they knew Him not, ready to baptize them with the HOLY GHOST and with fire. And so now, in these latter days, the Heralds of

CHRIST'S second coming are warning the people that He is at hand, and like the Baptist, referring to the Scripture for a proof that they are duly commissioned to prepare His way before Him.

Like him, they tell the Church of a "salvation ready to be revealed," of "times of refreshing" to come "from the presence of the LORD," of "times of the restitution of all things," and of the more glorious establishment of CHRIST'S kingdom; and, in earnest looking for the promise, they offer up the prayer of the Church that GOD would be pleased to raise up His power and come among us, and with great might succour us. But, while we hope for the promise, we must not forget the threatening.

The Baptist spoke of CHRIST'S coming with His fan in His hand, and of the separation which He would make between the chaff and the wheat; (comp. Mal. iv.) but what were the days of vengeance upon the Jewish Church, compared with those which we must expect, when the time is at length come that judgment must begin at the house of GOD, and the heavenly Reaper thrusts in His sharp sickle and reaps the earth? "The LORD, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple; behold He shall come, saith the LORD of HOSTS; but who may abide the day of His coming, and who shall stand when He appeareth?"

We find that when JESUS was coming nigh to Jerusalem, on the day of His triumphant entry, because they thought that the kingdom of GOD should immediately appear, He added and spake a parable; it was the parable of talents. (Luke xix.) And so, when we are disposed to indulge in bright anticipations of coming glory to the Church, let us rather turn our thoughts inward to our own individual privileges and individual responsibility, remembering that the kingdom of GOD is within us, and that to whomsoever much is given, of him will much be required.

And especially let us remember, that among the gifts given to us, for which we must give account, are, the New Commandment of love, the Inspired Words of GOD written for our learning, and His duly appointed Ministers sent before Him to prepare us for his coming.

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