

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The First Sunday of Advent
November 29, 2015

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The Second Coming of Christ will bring the final consummation of all things. In the New Testament this event is described by borrowing the picture language of the Old Testament apocalyptic writings. Much of today's gospel passage has its prototype in the *Book of Daniel*. Because of the subject matter what is being said is necessarily figurative or symbolic language. It is terrifying when we rework it into a literal interpretation. Those portraits of the Last Judgement by the great Italian masters are beautiful as art, but they do not leave us with a warm and rosy glow! They were not intended to do so.

It is absolutely crucial, however, that we do not focus on the tribulation and celestial portents and special effects of the writers and artists. In the effort to describe the Second Coming of Christ, it is crucial that we center our understanding *on Christ*. The *Book of the Revelation of Saint John the Divine* is a vision of the judgement and the day of wrath. And at the very beginning of the book St John puts the focus on the Lord. When St John in his visionary trance sinks down as though dead, One comes to him and puts His hand on him and says, "Fear not, It is I." *John knows that voice and those words!* Once when they were crossing the Sea of Galilee during a wind storm, the Lord Jesus had come to them and said the very same words: "Fear not, It is I."

So it is not simply the coming judgement of God Who is infinite, unknown, and eternal. The judgement has been handed to His Son, Who is not a stranger but Who has been a comrade in faith. God our judge once spent a night at sea in a boat with His friends. The judge will not meet us as one from another place but as one of us, Who knows us from His experience with us, and Who has suffered for us and with us.

Even the term "second coming" is misleading when it implies that the judge has been away from us. In St John's vision described in the *Book of Revelation* Christ is reigning in the midst of the Church. In the sacraments He is in a vital proximate relation to Christians on earth.

This means there is no need for modern Christians or skeptics to be bothered by the evident expectation of our forebears that Christ's second coming was imminent in

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chronological time. This interpretation was proved wrong by the passage of time. The *Book of Revelation* and all Christian apocalyptic writers were expressing in their unique phraseology what the Apostolic Church has always believed: the conviction of Christ's Presence now with the Church Militant. We say "Every Mass is Bethlehem." St John the Divine would respond, "Yes, exactly." It was this belief Christ is with us now that gave early Christians the expectation that He might reveal Himself at any moment.

St Paul advised the Corinthian Christians to *wait* "for the revelation of Our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul taught that way because the Lord had instructed the apostles to constantly expect His revelation. Jesus told them the Kingdom of God is nigh at hand and that it has one foot already in the threshold of their doors. In his epistle, St James also reflects this teaching of Jesus. "The judge standeth before the door."

It is as if the Apostolic Church expected Christ to break out of His Presence veiled in the Sacraments, or in the preaching, or through the person of His apostolic ministers, at any time. When St Paul used the Aramaic words "*maran atha*" (**our Lord is come**) that is very close to what we sing at Mass, *Benedictus qui venit* "**Blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord.**" At Mass the *Benedictus* are the last words sung before the consecration. They are words both of praise and a warning that *Someone is coming to us*.

The sacramental period of our life will end. "Then they will see," says the Lord. They will see the Son of Man coming. And it will be the end of the painful period of "not seeing" which has distinguished the Christian life ever since the Ascension Day. Our life in the Church Militant is characterized by our walking "by faith not sight." From our perspective we are living between the lighting of Christ's first coming and the thunder of His final advent. We live in an "in between" period. But we do so with expectant confidence, because we are strengthened by the Lord's promise and provision to be with us always.