

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Advent Sunday, 2018
December 2, 2018

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The Second Coming of Christ brings the final consummation of all things. In the New Testament we are told about this in a way which borrows the picture language of the Old Testament and apocalyptic writings. For example, much of today's gospel passage has its prototype in *The Book of Daniel*. Because of the subject matter the description uses figurative or symbolic language. The image is terrifying when we rework it into a literal interpretation. The portrayals of the Last Judgment by the great Italian masters are beautiful as fine art, but they do not leave us with a warm and rosy glow! The descriptions of the Last Judgment are meant to warn us how we live life now affects our place in the eternal realm of the Kingdom. But you are not to dismiss the warning as so much medieval clap-trap. Nor are you to despair. Despair is the devil's work.

It is absolutely crucial that we center our understanding of the Second Coming of Christ *on Christ*. Do not focus on the tribulation and celestial portents and special effects of the writers of the apocalypse. *The Book of the Revelation to St John the Divine* is a vision of the judgment and the day of wrath. And it is our guide. St John puts the focus *on the Lord*. For when 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. He knows those words!* Once when the disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee in a storm at night, the Master had come to them and said *those very same words*. "Fear not; It is I." And St John never forgot that moment!

We will face the coming judgment of God, Who is infinite, unknown, and eternal. But the judgment has been *handed to His Beloved Son*. And the Son is not a stranger but Who has been a comrade in faith. God is indeed our judge, but once He 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 if it implies the judge has been *away* from us. The ongoing experience of the Church is reflected in St John's *Revelation*. Christ *is* reigning in the midst of the Church. In the sacraments He is in a vital proximate relation to Christians on earth. It is as He promised.

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There is no need for modern Christians or skeptics to be bothered by the evident expectation of our ancient forbears in faith that Christ's second coming was imminent in their time. This expectation proved wrong by the passing of time. *The Book of Revelation* and all Christian apocalyptic writing expresses in unique phraseology what the Apostolic Church believed: the conviction of Christ's Presence with the Church Militant. It was this belief Christ is with us now that gave them the expectation that at any minute He would be fully revealed as in the days of His flesh, and this would end the provisional sacramental system.

St Paul advised his Corinthians to wait "for the revelation of Our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul taught that way because Our Lord had instructed the apostles to constantly expect His revelation. Our Lord told them the Kingdom of God is nigh at hand and that it has one foot already on the threshold of their doors. (During Advent you hear that message also from St John the Baptist.) And the Apostle James instructed, "The judge standeth before the door." The Lord was so close it was as if He was expected to break out in His Sacramental Presence, or in the preaching, or in the person of His apostolic ministers, at any moment. We had a sense of that imminent presence one Sunday in Kigali, Rwanda. When the celebrant held up the Blessed Sacrament, the people burst into sustained applause, welcoming Jesus! When St Paul used the Aramaic words "*maran atha*" (Our Lord is come) that is very close to what we still sing in the Mass, *Benedictus qui venit*, "Blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord." At every Mass the *Benedictus* announcement are the last words said before the consecration. They both praise *and warn* that *Someone is coming*.

Yes, in the Sacraments Christ is veiled. But "then they will see," says the Lord. They will see the Son of Man coming. And it will be the end of the painful "not seeing" which has characterized Christian life ever since the Ascension Day. Life in the Church Militant features our walking "by faith, not sight." And from our perspective we are living between the lightning of Christ's first coming and the thunder of His final advent. We live in that "in between" period. But we do so with expectant confidence because we are strengthened now by His Presence in His Catholic Church. The One Who spent a stormy night in a boat with His friends, is with us now.