

Pray More Advent Retreat 2019 - Transcript

He Shall Come Again Fr. Patrick Briscoe

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. In September of 1494, when Charles VIII of France invaded Italy and threatened Florence, the prophecies of the great Dominican preacher Savonarola seemed on the verge of fulfillment. You see, Savonarola had predicted the coming of the new Cyrus. Cyrus, the great Persian king who freed the people of Israel from their captivity. Savonarola predicted a new Cyrus would come, a leader who would be fit to free Florence of the despotic rule. Declaring that Florence would be a new Jerusalem, Savonarola longed for the city to be the world center of Christianity.

So too he predicted that it would be richer, more powerful, and more glorious than ever. To this end, Savonarola instituted the puritanical campaign, enlisting the help of Florentine youth to collect all kinds of secular art and books and poetry, to collect them not to be treasured or stored, but to be burned, that they might rid Florence of her vanities.

But today, I don't want to speak of Savonarola's political activism as such. I want instead to think of those great passages where Savonarola exhorts us to consider our final judgment. He counsels: We ought to be joyful, to show worldly men that the inheritance and glory which we await is so great that we do not hold anything in this present life to be of value. We have to judge, then, according to the mind of Christ. We have to judge according not to this life, but to the next.

This brings us to our theme today - He Shall Come Again. Advent is a particularly beautiful time in the church because we ponder the greatest mysteries of our faith. The mystery that once the world waited for the Messiah to come and, today, the world waits for the Messiah to come again. It is a time when we can be dedicated to the last days. In fact, the cycle of the natural world seems to point us this way. As darkness settles in, as the cold and gloom of winter at many parts of the United States settle in, our hearts seem more ready somehow to think of final and lasting things than they are, say, in the warmth of summer.

As we await our Lord's coming, we would do well to begin our reflection by thinking of the prophets of old, the prophets of Israel. The prophets spoke often of the Lord's coming and glory. They declared that it would be a day terrible and great. For the prophets, the day of the Lord was a mighty day of reckoning. Isaiah writes: ***For the Lord of hosts will have His day against all that is proud and arrogant, against all that is high - and it will be brought low.*** We can hear this words echoed in Our Lady's beautiful Magnificat, that our Lord lifts up the lowly, that our Lord lifts up the lowly and puts down the mighty from their thrones.

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This is a day that makes the earth tremble. This day quenches with fire. Zephaniah preaches that this day is a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and desolation. It is a great and terrible day. Many great Christian works of art capture the magnitude of this day. We have only to think of Michelangelo's *Last Supper* - which adorns the wall of the Sistine Chapel - or perhaps the depiction of Christ in Washington DC's Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. These works of art depict a day that is terrible and great. This is the day that Jesus Himself announced in His preaching. Fulfilling the promises of the prophets, He assures us that the conduct of each of us, the secrets of our hearts, will be brought to light. On the last day, Jesus will say to us ***"Truly, I say to you, as you did to one of the least of these, you did it to Me."***

In his gospel, St. Matthew says elsewhere ***When the Son of Man comes in His glory, all the angels with Him, He will sit on His throne. All the nations will be gathered before Him. He will separate the people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on His right and the goats on His left.*** This work of judging seems to us very much like a courtroom, and yet the great hymns of our tradition capture this day as being so much more. The Chk, for example, poetically sings "When the judge his seat attaineth, and each hidden deed arraigneth, nothing unavenged remaineth." Unlike a courtroom - where people often leave with some kind of unfinished business, or unsettledness, or any kind of numbers of responses to a verdict given - the last day will be ultimate. "Nothing unavenged remaineth." It is a perfect judgment.

Against this whole backdrop, this beautiful doctrine of the church, a message first preached by the Lord, Savonarola assures us "The gloom of the world is but a shadow; behind it, within our reach, is joy. Take joy." He continues "There's nothing better able to combat and rout the wicked men of our age than your good life. When they see it, they will be left overwhelmed and confused." This great and wise advice from Savonarola assures us that, even as we long for this day, we have to find a response to the... Even as we long for the day that the Lord will come, we have to find a response to the world now. What are we to do in the present age? The wickedness of this age is fought with faith, and prayer, and patience, and every other noble virtue.

As we put on the perspective of Christ each day, our hearts being molded more after Christ's own sacred heart, we remember to not be grand in the virtues of this world, not to seek them, but to pursue life and the virtues of the Kingdom of Heaven. We must eschew wealth, and power, and success, and grand homes, and honor, and glory, and promotions, and fame, and any other thing which carries the scent of this life rather than the perfumes of heaven. The key to this way of life is detachment. This was a great theme of the medieval Dominican Meister Eckhart.

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He says “Detachment leads me to where I am receptive to nothing except God.” Eckhart describes a spirit that is detached as a mighty mountain of lead, which confronts everything that challenges it as if it were a meager puff of wind. If we’re detached, we are free. Detachment can affect us all; it’s not the sort of thing that’s easy to scale. Detachment, detachment is about fostering a spirit of liberty where there is room for God in our lives.

Again, Eckhart, he assures us that detachment leads me to where I am receptive to nothing except God. We can be too attached to things, whether we have very many things or very few things. We can cling to things, making them too heavy for us to carry into the life to come, even good things. Many things become burdensome for us. Oh, there are piles of holy cards that we treasure more than virtues, more than the people around us. We have to be free from them, we have to be detached. Christ is the Lord of eternal life. He will come to pass judgment on the works and hearts of men. This right Jesus has required by His holy promise. “Do you wish to be free?” Savonarola asks. And above all things, love God, love your neighbor, love one another, love the common good, then you will have true liberty.

This freedom, this liberty Savonarola counsels is very like the detachment of Eckhart. We would do well to remember, though, that as we await this last judgment, as we believe that Jesus will come again, that we appear before Christ over and over and over again. Each Sunday, or perhaps each day if we’re able, or any time we are present before the Lord in adoration, we present ourselves before the Holy Eucharist. It’s an invitation for us to take stock of our lives, to say “Where am I, Lord? Am I viewing things from the perspective of this life, or from the perspective of the world to come?” In each Mass, the priest prays before receiving holy communion: “May the receiving of Your body and blood, Lord Jesus, not bring me to judgment and condemnation, but through Your loving mercy be for me a protection in mind and body.” Our Lord comes to us in the Eucharist. We place our lives before Him.

Paul warns us if we eat and drink unworthily, we subject ourselves to condemnation. We are being judged. He knows our hearts. Of course, the great question is when He comes again, will He say to us “I never knew you,” or will He say to us “Come. You, blessed of My Father, take your place prepared for you in the Kingdom from the creation of the world.” *All glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be. World without end. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*