



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The First Sunday in Advent, December 1st, 2013

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
And of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

It might seem a tad strange to find ourselves reading St. Matthew's account of Palm Sunday with only 25 shopping days left until Christmas. No matter how you cut it, there is something a bit weird about looking forward to the most cheerful feast of the Christian year only to discover that the Church is trying to concentrate our minds upon the tragic events of the first Easter.

Advent, of course, is the season that culminates in Christmas. Even so, the focus of Advent is not Jesus Christ's first coming with its angels, shepherds and Holy Child cozily wrapped up in swaddling clothes. This time the focus is on the next thing on God's agenda: Christ's Second Coming – an event that culminates not with the cheery arrival of three wise men, but with the judgment of the world.

The Second Coming is an event the Church has eagerly awaited for the best part of 2000 years. And that, in itself, is not a little strange, because Jesus warns us in Holy Scripture that the event is going to take us all by surprise because, unlike the last time, he will “come like a thief in the night.”

When he arrived the first time, people knew exactly who he was. St. Matthew tells us that on the first Palm Sunday, Jesus entered the City of Jerusalem in precisely the manner foretold by the Prophet Zechariah: “Behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt,

the foal of an ass.”

And the crowd who watched him ride into the Holy City knew greeted him in the precisely the way the Scriptures prescribed – with brandished palm branches and shouts of “hosanna.”

However within five days of Jesus' triumphal arrival in the Holy City, the self-same people were baying for his blood. Jerusalem's John Q. Public of 2,000 years ago expected the Messiah to be a military leader who would kick out the Romans and win Judea's independence. When Jesus displayed no inclination to do any such thing, they felt let down. Given the choice of believing God's Word or their own ideas, they naturally chose to go with their own feelings on the subject.

From this, it is reasonable to assume the Second Coming will take us similarly by surprise. After all, we are just as prone to rationalizing away the obvious warnings as folks were 2000 years ago. It simply is human nature.

This time round the problem won't be failing to recognize the right Messiah, but our propensity for latching on to false ones. However, Jesus in another lesson appointed for *today* (*St. Luke's Gospel 21: 25-33*), says he will be very hard to miss. We shall lift up our eyes and see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”

This time it won't be gentle Jesus, meek and mild. This time it will be the Judge who separates the sheep from the goats. It is a terrifying prospect, but Jesus has given us plenty of advice about preparing for it.

There is, for instance, the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. The five wise virgins and the five foolish ones symbolize all of us Christians. The bridegroom, of course, is Christ. His arrival at the Wedding Feast, late and unexpected, represents his First and his Second Coming. The Last Judgment is represented by his entry to the Wedding Feast.

The five wise brides maids, ready and waiting for him with their lamps burning, are admitted to the party. But the foolish virgins, who had forgotten oil for their lamps, are locked outside in the cold. His point is: Just being a Christian isn't enough. Passively espousing Christianity won't pass the final muster. Jesus demands that we live our faith.

Actually, the parable of the wise and foolish virgins is part of a long discourse on "the end times" – the Second Coming and the Last Judgment. And every occasion he raises the subject, Jesus delivers the same message: Just like his First Coming, his Second Coming will take us all by surprise. For this reason, we would be wise to live as though we were expecting it at any moment.

St. Luke's account of events leading up to the birth of John the Baptist shows this is easier said than done. John's father, an old and distinguished clergyman called Zacharias, was at the pinnacle of a long career in the Jewish priesthood. If anybody should have understood that the Messiah might arrive at any moment, it was he.

It was Zacharias' turn to make the offering on the Altar of Incense – an offering a priest could make only once in his life. The Altar stood directly behind the curtain that veiled the Holy of Holies. Incense burnt on it symbolized God's acceptance of Israel's prayers. It was the equivalent of our Eucharist.

On this day, Zacharias followed a ritual that had been established for almost 1,000 years. He entered the Holiest of Holies, swiftly threw the incense on to the altar and intoned a prayer for the Coming of the Messiah. As soon as Zacharias uttered the ancient formula the Archangel Gabriel materialized on the right hand side of the Altar.

"Fear not, Zacharias," he said, "for thy prayer is heard. Thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John . . . And he shall go before the Messiah in the spirit and power of Elijah to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

It was the greatest honor a Jew could hope for. So what was Zacharias' response? St. Luke tells us he was outraged. "What are you saying?" he exclaimed, "I am an old man and my wife' up in years, too. We're much too old for these sort nonsense."

Zacharias' petulance is, frankly, amazing. He was a top Bible scholar. As a priest, he knew scripture backwards – and every word the Archangel Gabriel spoke was quoted directly from the Bible. It is impossible to believe Zacharias failed to recognize what Gabriel was saying.

But Zacharias had a good thing going for him. He was at the top of his profession. He was well off, happily married and planning a comfortable retirement. This Messiah business was just dandy so long as it was only a beautiful dream. The idea of it turning into reality was devastating. It would disrupt all his plans for the future.

The first lesson to be drawn from this 2,000-year-old story of skepticism and disbelief is that we'd be very wise to live our lives as though the Second Coming was about to happen at any minute.

The second lesson is that God tends answer our prayers in his own good time and in ways we least expect. On the other hand, he sometimes gives us exactly what we want and at the exact the time we pray for it. And, as Zacharias discovered, that can be decidedly unnerving. *AMEN.*