



# ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The First Sunday in Advent, November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014

**✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Ghost ✠**

There's something more than a little odd about the "proprs" appointed for today, the First Sunday in Advent. Generally, the collect (prayer) appointed for the day and the readings each convey a similar message, but the ones appointed for the First Sunday in Advent simply don't seem to be related to one another.

The collect deals with the grisly business of the Last Judgment. The reading from St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans talks about the importance of loving one another to the Christian faith. And in the Gospel appointed St. Matthew relates the events that took place on Palm Sunday. It's all a bit of a mishmash.

But most puzzling of all, the proprs seem just a trifle gloomy for the beginning of the season that culminates in the happiest festival in the Church Year: the birthday of our Lord Jesus' Christ. What's more, it seems a bit weird that the liturgical color is purple/violet – the color of penitence and mourning. White, symbolic of purity and joy everlasting, would seem to be a more appropriate Advent color.

Joy, however, isn't exactly the emotion that Christians are expected to experience during Advent. It's a season for looking forward, rather than backward. We aren't awaiting the coming of a baby Jesus in the manger. The event we are anticipating is not Jesus' first coming, but rather his second coming.

This time it won't be gentle Jesus, meek and mild. This time he will be arriving "in glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead." This time he'll be coming as it will be Christ the King – the

Judge who separates the sheep from the goats, telling the ungodly: "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels . . ."

St. Paul, in his First Letter to the Thessalonians, tells us we shouldn't expect too much warning when it's about to happen. "You know perfectly well," he writes, "that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. Just when people are saying, Peace and safety; ruin will suddenly fall upon them."

It's quite terrifying, but the proprs appointed for today are intended to help us to avoid getting into trouble when it happens. The collect warns us of what's around the corner, so to speak. The Gospel makes us cautious about the dangers of being unprepared, and, in his epistle, St. Paul maps out a strategy for being ready to meet our creator.

At first glance, the story of Palm Sunday might seem an odd way of illustrating the dangers of being unprepared. If anyone was prepared to greet the Messiah, it seems reasonable to suppose it was the folks who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. They shouted the right greeting: "Hosanna! Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." They waved branches of the palm tree and they carpeted the roadway with their coats – all these actions were prescribed in Holy Scripture.

But Palm Sunday isn't the end of the story. The very same people who cheered Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, were baying for his blood only five days later. They shouted "Crucify him; crucify him" because he did not do what they

expected him to do; what they wanted him to do. And because he failed to fulfill their expectations they decided he was worthy of death.

They rejected God's because of our human inability to grasp that God works to his own timetable and not ours; and that our way of doing things is not his way of doing things. We rationalize away obvious warnings, and cast our own gloss on his prophecies – refusing to believe he usually fulfills them to the letter.

There is the same message, albeit from a different perspective, in another reading appointed for today. St. Luke's account of events leading up to the birth of John the Baptist. It tells how Zacharias, John's father, a crusty old clergyman at the pinnacle of his long career, went to make the offering on the Altar of Incense – an offering a priest could make only once in his life.

The incense offering was the most sacred ritual at the Temple. It was even more sacred than the blood sacrifices – the oxen, lambs and doves slaughtered and burnt at the Altar of the Burnt Offering, just outside the sanctuary on the Temple Porch. The Altar of Incense, by contrast, was right inside the sanctuary of the Temple. It stood directly in front of the Holy of Holies. Incense burnt on the altar 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 Holies, swiftly threw the incense on to the altar and intoned a prayer for the Coming of the Kingdom of God; 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 . . . he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. 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. But

Luke writes that far from being pleased Zacharias was outraged. "Why are you saying this to me?" he demanded, "I am an old man and so is my wife. We're much too old for this sort of nonsense."

Zacharias was a top Bible scholar and he must have realized every word Gabriel spoke was quoted directly from the fourth chapter of the Book of Malachi, a book as popular as the Book of Revelation today. But Zacharias had a good thing going for him. He was at the top of profession. He was well-off, happily married and looking forward to a comfortable retirement. This Messiah business would disrupt all his plans for the future.

One lesson to draw from these 2,000-year-old stories of skepticism and disbelief is that God answers our prayers in ways and at times we least expect. And sometimes he even gives us exactly what we want, at exactly the time we are praying for it. Another is that just because the second coming has not yet taken place, it is foolish to assume it won't happen. Indeed, we'd be very wise to live our lives as though it were about to happen at any minute.

Jesus spent a great deal of time during the last week before his crucifixion talking about his Second Coming and the Last Judgment. And each time he delivered the same message: The Second Coming will take us all by surprise, and we would be wise to live as though we were expecting it at any moment. Passively espousing Christianity isn't enough. Jesus demands we live our faith. And St. Paul, in today's epistle, tells us how to do it.

Loving one's fellow men, he says, is our single most important obligation. If we try as conscientiously as possible to love our neighbors as ourselves, he says, we will be honoring all of ten of the Commandments. And according to Jesus, this is the best way to make sure we recognize him when he comes. After all, if we treat every other human being that we meet in the same way we would treat Jesus, there is no way we will be able to miss him. AMEN.

***To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN***