



# ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The First Sunday in Advent, November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2016

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

There's something a bit odd about reading St. Matthew's account of Palm Sunday three days after Thanksgiving and with only 25 shopping days left until Christmas. After all, it's a trifle weird to be anticipating the most joyous feast of the Christian year while the Church is insisting that we concentrate our minds upon the tragic events of the first Easter.

Advent, of course, is the liturgical season that culminates in Christmas. Even so, the focus of Advent has nothing to do with the Messiah's First Coming with its angels, shepherds and the Holy Child cozily wrapped up in swaddling clothes – the Roman equivalent of Huggies.

Advent deals, primarily with the next major event on God's agenda: Jesus's Second Coming – an event that culminates not with the cheery appearance of three wise men, but with Jesus arriving in great majesty to judge the world.

Strange to say, in view of the terrifying nature of the event, the Church has been eagerly awaiting the Second Coming of our Saviour for the best part of 2000 years. And the eagerness is all the more surprising because Jesus has warned us in graphic terms that, unlike his very public first arrival, this time he will “come like a thief in the night.”

When he appeared the first time, people knew exactly who he was. Matthew tells us that on the first Palm Sunday, he entered 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 we can conclude that the crowd who watched him ride into the Holy City knew exactly who he was because they greeted him in the precisely the manner the Scriptures prescribed – with brandished palm branches and shouts of “hosanna.”

It is, however, an awful lot less comforting to recall that within five days of Jesus' triumphal arrival in the Holy City, the very same mob that welcomed in the city were baying for his blood. This is because they were disappointed that he wasn't doing things they wanted them to be done.

They were expecting the Messiah to be a military leader who would kick out the Roman occupiers 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 seems reasonable to conclude that 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 quite disquieting prospect, but Jesus has given us plenty advice about how to prepare 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 Jesus – and 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 to bring 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. But when put to the test, he failed.

This is the lesson we should learn from St. Luke's account of events leading up to the birth of John the Baptist. John's father, an old and distinguished clergyman called Zacharias, was at the pinnacle of a long career in the Jewish priesthood. After all, if anybody should have understood that the Messiah might arrive at any moment, it was Zacharias.

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 of Incense stood directly behind the vast curtain that veiled the Holy of Holies. The incense burnt on the solid gold 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 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. But St. Luke records that Zacharias 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' protestations are, 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 that he 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 thing was just fair and 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 gross disobedience and ingratitude 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. Most disturbing of all, he sometimes gives us exactly what we want and at the exact the time we pray for it. *AMEN.*

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