Advent Reflections

on the Collect* of the Mass for the First Sunday of Advent

Advent is the season of the Church’s Year of Grace in which we pray for and await the coming of Christ – and this in numerous ways. First of all, as is evident in the secular world, we are awaiting the celebration of Christmas. This is the feast of God’s Coming to earth in the birth of Jesus. His Incarnation was the beginning of our salvation. So fittingly the season of Advent is geared to help us celebrate this crucial moment in history.

But there is another Coming of Christ which concerns the Church during this holy season: that is, the Final Coming for the Last Judgment. This aspect of Advent is called the “eschatological” (pronounced es-cat-uh-logical) rather than “incarnational.” That word comes from the Greek, and refers to the last things, the final period of the world’s history. Jesus warned His followers to be watchful, for we do not know just when the end of the world is coming. (cf. Matt 24:13-14)

In addition, as St. Bernard taught in the medieval period, there is yet a third Coming, of which the Church is always aware: that is, when Christ comes to us now, especially in sacrament, and in charity that we exercise toward one another. In other words, Christ also comes daily in us. Advent is a good season to wake up our faith about these Comings, as that will have a noticeable effect upon our Christian lives.

With this theological background in mind, a beautiful image is presented in the first three lines of this Collect-Prayer. The Church prays for the grace of eagerness for Christ’s Comings, “run forth to meet your Christ” (line 2). The Church knows that Christ is coming toward us; it prays that we might “run forth to meet” Him. Because it is a matter of faith which makes us aware of Christ’s Coming in one form or another, we pray for God’s grace to give us the resolve necessary to be eager for such a Coming. (lines 1 & 2) The third Coming mentioned above is presumed in line 3: we ask for the grace to meet Christ at His Coming “with righteous deeds.” Included in this, above all, are actions of charity for others.

Jesus warned His disciples that we will be judged not merely by our words but by our deeds. “It is not those who say to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven.” (Matt 7:21) Paul, in his preaching and writing always upheld the same: he speaks of his preaching as intended to get “people to repent and turn to God, proving their change of heart by their deeds.” (Acts 26:20) And he warns the Corinthians that even Satan and his minions can perform works of righteousness, so as to deceive even the elect. (Cf. 2 Cor 11:15) Thus, what the Church is petitioning God for in this Prayer is a righteousness of the heart, of an authentic longing for and moving toward Christ, and not merely the externals of such.

Line 4 takes us in the Final Coming period, when Christ in the Last Judgment will separate “the sheep” from “the goats”, placing the elect “at His right hand.” (Cf. Matt 25:31ff) We know that if we are placed on Jesus’ right hand, then heaven is ours – which is what line 5 petitions we may possess.

This one Collect then brings out in one way or another all three of the Comings of Christ spoken of above, although the Coming in the Incarnation is not explicitly stated as it will be in later Sundays of Advent. May our hearts be open to pray it fervently.

Come, Lord Jesus, and do not delay!

*The Collect is the prayer that comes immediately before the first reading.