

Who Comes in the Name of the Lord

In the name of him hailed as the Son of David, dear friends in Christ: We begin today a new year on the church calendar. And as I've observed before, the new year starts on the same note that the last year ended, namely, in hopeful anticipation of the coming of the Lord and recognizing our need to prepare for his arrival. And though it's the same theme, there is a twist: at the end of the year we're looking forward to that final coming of Christ when he will appear in the clouds with great glory to judge the living and the newly raised dead. As Advent begins, we step back and reset the clock, so to speak. Think of it as the church's version of ending Daylight Savings Time – but instead of going back just one hour, we go back several thousand years to place ourselves, spiritually anyway, among those who were looking forward to Christ's first coming and who were longing for the day when the promised Savior would appear and redeem Israel from her sins.

They are two starkly different appearances of the Lord, and yet they are prophetically linked and closely related. And what I'd like to do this morning is to compare and contrast these two comings of the Lord in order to see what insights we might be able to glean.

Consider Christ's first coming that we celebrate at Christmas. Then the Lord's entry into the world was practically a stealth operation. It was a quiet occurrence that went unnoticed by most of the world's population – unnoticed even by those who were supposedly most eagerly awaiting his arrival. I mean, who was aware of it? Mary and Joseph, certainly; presumably also Zechariah and Elizabeth who were the parents of John the Baptizer; and then there were the handful of shepherds to whom the angels proclaimed the good news – and that's about it. One of the single most profound events in world history, God appearing in flesh for the first time, and less than a dozen people know what's going on.

A few others became aware of it later. There were Simeon and Anna who realized who the baby Jesus was when he was brought to the temple for presentation, and there were the wise men who surprisingly appeared, offered their worship and gifts, and then sneaked away specifically to avoid telling anyone in Jerusalem what they had found.

The initial appearance of the Lord in flesh was all very hush hush. And it was marked by two things: deep humility and bitter persecution. We see the humility in the poor couple chosen to be his parents, the lowly circumstances of his birth – his first bed a feed trough for livestock, and his later being raised in the no account village of Nazareth of Galilee. We see the persecution in King Herod's heavy-handed, scorched-earth attempt to murder him by slaughtering the infant boys of Bethlehem. The king wasn't even sure the Christ had been born; but he wasn't taking any chances, so great was his fear that he might be supplanted. And in this he served as the agent of Satan who is the ruler of this fallen world who feared being supplanted by the heir of David's throne: the one legitimately born King of the Jews. And then for thirty years, roughly half a lifetime, nothing. Well, there was that one incident at the temple when he was a lad of twelve years. But though the religious teachers were impressed by his understanding and questions, no one there was thinking that he might be the promised Christ

Today's Gospel places us at the tail end of the Lord's first coming. Three years earlier he'd launched his public ministry, bursting upon the scene, appearing as if out of nowhere, preaching, teaching, and performing amazing miracles that displayed his divine power. In the process he gained a large following. And, it needs to be added, he made a lot of enemies. One

side is sure they know who he is. The secret so long held they now loudly proclaim. "This is the promised Son of David, the Savior, the Christ, the one we've all been waiting for. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna! Save us now, Son of David!" The citizens of Jerusalem hear the commotion and they understand what his followers are saying: that the one they are hailing is indeed the Christ. When they ask, "Who is this [you're talking about]?" They reply, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee." Now it's out there for everyone to hear.

In fulfillment of prophecy his followers are expecting nothing short of the dawn of the Messianic age. But first they know there has to be a major confrontation. The judgment of God must fall upon the wicked. Sin and rebellion must be wiped away. Only then can the kingdom be restored. And for the most part, they are right about all of that. It is what the prophetic Scriptures say – the prophetic Scriptures they see being fulfilled right down to the detail of having their proclaimed King make his triumphant entry into Jerusalem mounted on a donkey.

What his followers *don't* understand is the *how*. What they don't get is the timeline and proper sequence of events. What they don't see is that in proclaiming him to be the Christ, they are painting a target on him. It's precisely this claim, this secret now out in the open, that puts him in the sights of the enemy as one who must be destroyed. This too is part of the Lord's plan: for his Christ to be delivered into the hands of sinful men, to be falsely accused and condemned, and to be put to death in the most horrible and shameful way imaginable. His followers cry "Hosanna! Save us now!" *That's* what he has come to do: not by bringing God's judgment on the wicked, but by allowing God's judgment of the wicked to fall on him.

For all have sinned and fall short of his kingdom. All are wicked and in rebellion against God. If the judgment of God his followers were expecting were to have come then and there, it would have included all of them as well. But the Lord had planned something else, something far better than they could have imagined – though it too was an open "secret" recorded in the prophetic Scriptures: for the Lord's Christ to be the suffering servant who would redeem his chosen people by bearing their iniquities, for the Son of David to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. How fitting then that the only charge recorded above his head on the cross was the same claim made by his followers on Palm Sunday: This is Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.

And now we live in a time that is very much analogous to those first thirty years of Jesus' life on earth. Though he, our King, is in the world, he is unseen and unrecognized by most people. It's like we sing in the Christmas hymn: "No ear can hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive his still, the dear Christ enters in." As then, his presence in the world is marked by two things: humility and persecution. We see his humility in the ways he chooses to come to us: in the proclamation of his Gospel, in the announcement of his forgiveness, in the water and Word of Holy Baptism, in the bread and wine of his Holy Supper, and in his collective body we call the Church – our brothers and sisters in the faith, and specifically in their needs and problems that we are called upon to alleviate through our loving service to them. By serving them, we are serving our King.

The persecution we see too. In our part of the world it comes mostly in the form of ridicule. We're told that we're stupid and silly to believe that God even exists, and even sillier to believe that a Jewish peasant who (may have) lived and died 2000 years ago is some kind of divine Savior. Increasingly our dearly held moral beliefs drawn from Scripture are placing us at odds with our culture. Our views on the sanctity of life and marriage and family are all under fire, and by holding to them we will certainly come under more active persecution. Some

already have. In other parts of the world those who confess the name of Jesus are suffering far worse. And so, it will go until the Lord's final appearing, an event we eagerly await just as the Old Testament faithful awaited his first coming.

That day will be a lot more like Palm Sunday. Then he will appear before all and his identity will be known to everyone. All will be made to confess that Jesus is Lord. And every detail of prophetic Scripture will be fulfilled. No donkey this time; he'll be riding on the clouds. And he who was once judged for the sins of the world will be the Judge. He will separate those who are righteous by his saving work, who through faith in him are washed and redeemed by his blood, from those who denied or failed to recognize him in their lives on earth. These latter will be condemned and cast out. They'll have no part of his kingdom.

Meanwhile we who by grace and the power of his Holy Spirit have welcomed his continuous coming in humble ways will welcome even more his coming in glory. Through him we will inherit the new heaven and earth and live forever in perfect love and peace. Therefore, in order to keep ourselves prepared, let our prayer be the same of that as his followers on Palm Sunday whether he comes to us in humility or in glory: "Hosanna! Save us now, Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!