

### ***That'll Be the Day***

In the name of him who is coming to judge the earth, dear friends in Christ: There's a popular expression we use when someone, usually someone whose unreliable character is well known, tells us that he or she is going to do something that we know very well they're never going to get around to. That's when you say, "Right. *That'll be the day.*" It turns out that just about every culture and language on earth has a number of other expressions to communicate same idea. These include such phrases as: when hell freezes over, when pigs fly, when chickens have teeth, when grapes grow on willows, when fish climb trees, when the 7-11 closes, and this from the French: on St. Glinglin's Day (there is no St. Glinglin) – all are sarcastic ways of saying that it isn't going to happen. *That day* will never come.

And sometimes I wonder if that isn't our own attitude about the day of Christ's return. Seriously, how often do you bother to think about it – that there is in the mind of God a definite predetermined date and time when this world and everything in it will come to an end, and that with each passing moment the sand in the hour glass of the present age is running out? Don't you instead tend to push the notion from your mind and go on with life as if it isn't going to happen? Isn't it more like, "Yeah, sure, Christ is coming back – or so he says; but it isn't going to happen in my lifetime; or in that of my children or grandchildren. So why should it concern me?" Isn't that pretty much the way you think about it? Like something that belongs more to the realm of science fiction or fairy tales than reality? More fantasy than fact? And if so, what is that except to say to the Lord himself, "Yeah, right. *That'll be the day*"?

This is one of the reasons I find so much wisdom in observing the Church calendar. By adhering to it we are exposed throughout the year to a review of all the fundamental articles of the Christian faith. And the inevitable coming of the Day of the Lord is one of those articles. We confess it every time we recite one of the Creeds. And it's important that we understand this: just as sure as we believe that Christ the Lord became our brother in flesh, and that he lived, died, rose again, and ascended into heaven, so also we are to be looking forward to the day of his return. And I've got news for you: That *will be the Day*. That'll be the day the heavenly trumpet sounds and Jesus Christ descends visibly. That'll be the day when tombs are opened and the dead are raised in bodies incorruptible. That'll be the day the angels gather the elect from the four corners of the earth. That'll be the day when the Lord Jesus, like a shepherd, separates his sheep from the goats. That'll be the day the wicked and unbelieving are cast forever from the Lord's gracious presence. That'll be the day this earth is laid bare and consumed in purifying fire. And that'll be the day when the Lord creates a new heaven and a new earth that will be the dwelling place of the righteous for all eternity.

All of that really will happen one day – on the day the Lord has chosen. That day is fast approaching; it will surely come. And knowing that should influence how we think about the present and how we make use of our time now. It should, for example, remind us to order our priorities correctly. None of us knows how much time we have left. That means the time we have is precious, and that we need always to keep what's most important up front and center in our lives. What's that? Well, since this world and everything in it is destined to pass away it can't be anything around here. The only things you've got that will survive into the next life are your immortal soul and the relationships you have with others who by faith are in Christ. So making sure that your own Christian faith is strong, vibrant, and free of error – and helping others to do the same has always got to be job one. In whatever else you're doing, if you've

missed that first priority, then it's all wasted effort. Jesus asked, "What good it would it be to gain the whole world if you lost your own soul?" None. Therefore, precisely because Jesus can return at any time, it's absolutely vital that you are at all times ready to receive him.

So believing in Christ's imminent return helps us to keep our priorities straight. Another thing it does is to encourage us in the midst of trials and suffering. I mean if you look around this world and take stock of what's going on, it's easy to become fearful and discouraged. Economies are collapsing, there are wars and threats of violence, no place seems to be beyond the reach of terrorists any more, injustice and oppression abound, the wicked seem always to get away with their crimes, and on top of it all there are natural disasters and epidemics and famines throughout the world ... altogether it paints a gloomy picture. Pondering the enormity of it all, it's easy to begin to wonder if the Lord knows what he's doing. And why he lets it go on. Is it that he doesn't care? Or that he's powerless to stop it? Satan loves to tempt us with such thoughts. But the truth that Christ will return reminds us that everything is proceeding according to the good and gracious will of God. His plans are not thwarted despite what we see. Sin and suffering have their day now; but they will not be allowed to continue indefinitely. The Lord knows what he's doing and when he's ready, at the appointed hour, he will set things right. So we need not succumb to fear or depression whatever happens. Though the earth itself gives way we stand on a promise of Christ that is firmer and longer lasting than the earth.

So there is much to be gained by keeping the truth of Christ's return somewhere in the forefront of our minds. That being said, there are some pitfalls we want to avoid. One has to do with setting dates. Over the 2000 year history of the Christian Church there have been many people who were so obsessed with the idea of Christ's return that they convinced themselves that the information needed to calculate the precise date of its occurrence is secretly hidden within the text of the Scriptures. It isn't; but nevertheless they fooled themselves into believing that they discovered the answer by performing the right combination of mathematical operations on certain numbers that appear in the Bible. For instance you could take the number of days Ezekiel fasted, multiply by three because we worship a Triune God, deduct seven for the number of days in the week, and then add 1150 (because that's half of 2300 –don't ask me why that's significant), then for reasons unclear assume that the start point is the date of the dedication of the second temple in 516 BC, and that the number of days stands for the number of years from then until Christ's return – and Shazam! The date just magically appears. It was yesterday. Whoops! And while that explanation was an attempt at humor, the sad truth is that all the date setters have used the same kinds of groundless assumptions and capricious number crunching to produce their own results – results that they stood by with fanatical intensity—until proven wrong.

You may be aware that Harold Camping who is the host of American Family Radio has set May 21<sup>st</sup> 2011 as the day of Christ's return. He's guessed wrong several times in the past. The dates he was so sure of came and went without a sign of the powers of the heavens being shaken; but this time he says he's absolutely certain. I saw a recent interview he did in which someone asked him about his former mistakes. He explained that doing the sort of biblical study he does is kind of like learning to ride a bike. The first couple of times you try, you're bound to fall off. His previous bad guesses were mistakes he made while learning to ride; but now he knows how. Ohhh! Of course! Somehow I suspect that he's heading for another close encounter with the asphalt. Let's hope that after this he puts the bike away and leaves it alone.

Close kin to the date setters are those who try to determine the *general* time of Christ's return by keeping track of world events – and in particular events that have to do with the modern nation of Israel. I'm sure you've been exposed to at least bits and pieces of a myth that

pervades many American Evangelical churches. It's a false teaching called Dispensational Pre-millennialism, a discredited idea born in the mid eighteenth hundreds that was given a facelift and makeover in the nineteen sixties and seventies by a self proclaimed prophecy expert named Hal Lindsey. He wrote a very popular and unfortunately all too influential book entitled *The Late Great Planet Earth*. In this book, he explained how events described in the Revelation of St. John were now beginning to unfold before our eyes – and that the key to understanding them is what's happening in Israel and in the Middle East. Now, as it turns out, all of Hal's initial predictions have been proven false; but the idea he proposed keeps evolving and adapting to keep up with current events and political situations. Many others have taken up the idea and run with it. There's one whole "non-denominational" denomination called Calvary Chapel that has bought into these ideas hook, line, and sinker – it's their main emphasis; but you'll see the same ideas cropping up in other churches bodies too. You know you're dealing with it when you hear talk about the so called secret return of Christ, the rapture of the church, the great tribulation that will be suffered by those who are left behind, the thousand year reign of Christ on earth, the formation of a one world government or a one world religion presided over by an evil character called the Anti-Christ, and so on.

When you hear these things you know you're dealing with a grave misunderstanding of the way the Bible says the future will unfold. I urge you to steer clear of these teachings for three main reasons. First because they're wrong; that alone should be cause enough to avoid them. Second, because those who become involved in these ideas tend to spend less time in God's Word and Sacraments actually feeding their faith and more time in idle speculation about how what happened today might be a fulfillment of some obscure passage of Scripture. They think they're doing Bible study when in fact they're only misappropriating Bible passages for purposes they were never intended for. Third and finally, sooner or later those who engage in such speculation come to realize that prophetic passages they were so sure were fulfilled by events five, ten, twenty years ago – these passages are being recycled and reinterpreted in such a way that they are understood to apply to new events happening today. This can lead to a real crisis of faith when folks discover that things they were so sure of were wrong. Their teachers led them astray. And it can happen for some that instead of questioning the crazy notions being improperly taught from God's Word, they begin to doubt the Word of God itself. So like I said, do yourself a favor and avoid these Bible prophecy experts together with their books and seminars.

All right, those are two pitfalls concerning the return of the Lord Jesus that we want to stay away from. We don't want to set dates, nor do we want to try to read too much into world events and misuse the Scriptures in the process. There's one more pitfall I want to mention, and that's the one St. Paul addresses in today's Epistle lesson.

We've already seen that the truth of Christ's return – which could happen at any time – should help us to keep our priorities straight and encourage us in the face of adversity. That's well and fine. Unfortunately, there were some members at the church at Thessalonica who went too far with this idea. They reasoned that since Jesus is coming back – sometime very soon, they assumed – there was no sense in continuing to do what's necessary to go on living in this world. They thought, why knock ourselves out planting, harvesting, doing business, cleaning house, and all life's other burdensome chores if it's all going to be for naught? Why get an education? Why learn new skills? Why store up for a rainy day? It's all going to turn out to be wasted effort when Jesus appears.

Now, I imagine that they thought of themselves as being very spiritual for thinking this way, no doubt more so than those who went on working for a living. "I believe Jesus is coming;

that's why I'm not working any more. I trust him to take care of me. But look at you: still hard at it as if this world was all there is. Oh, you of little faith. Too bad you're not as faithful as me. And say, could you lend me a few loaves of bread? We're all out at my house." Imagine that; but that was precisely the problem. Those who weren't working due to their "higher" spirituality were sponging off those who were. And not just sponging off them, they were meddling in their affairs. Without any work of their own to keep them occupied, they had plenty of free time to stick their noses into other peoples' business; and they did.

Writing to the congregation there, St. Paul commands them to have nothing to do with such idle people. "Keep away from them; and whatever you do, don't feed them. If they won't work, don't let them eat. Instead command and encourage them to get back to work and to quietly go about their own business." That's pretty blunt, and there's no mistaking what Paul means. But then he completes the passage with these words: "As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good."

That's the operating principle we too are to live by as we await with patience and hope the return of the Lord Jesus. We do not know how much time we have left before the Day of the Lord. But we do know this: every moment that we have is a gift from God. And what we do with the time is important. Keeping first things first, we always want to make sure that we feed our faith: that we examine ourselves and confess our sins, that we receive Christ's Word of forgiveness, that we grow in the knowledge of his Word and the power of his Spirit, and that we commune with Jesus and one another regularly in his holy Supper. Having done all that, we want to encourage others to do the same so that their faith is strengthened and refined also.

But then what? Having fed the faith, having shared it, we are to put our faith into action by doing good. We are to use the time and talents entrusted to us by the Lord to serve others – to show them the love of God by our actions, by caring for the legitimately needy, by befriending strangers, by visiting the sick, and by lending a helping hand wherever and to whomever needs it. In such ways, as the days darken and the love of many grows cold, the loving service we render to others will shine brightly and warmly. These acts of kindness and mercy will testify to the world of the saving faith and hope that we hold in our hearts. Through these acts – through us – Jesus who came to serve and to save the lost continues to do his work. Our part is making ourselves available for him to do it.

May he give us the grace to do so, from now until he comes – for that'll be the day. In Jesus name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***