

From the desk of Fr. Jim

Advent 1 – Who Comes?

A great deal of the sentiment of the season is attractive and irresistible. A family gathered around the Christmas dinner table sharing the events of the past year cannot find a comparison in its ability to shower us with joy.

The Church has always put on its best with music and décor. Occasionally the world musters its last measure of decency and sets aside weapons and hate for one day. Christmas is a powerful weapon in the arsenal of God.

There is a side of the season that may not be so attractive to everyone. It is the reminder that the child born in the stable is not a passive and powerless infant. Beneath the cover of his humanity is the almighty God, the just judge.

For those of you who joined us for the CRHP Cenacle last Wednesday evening, you heard a reading from St. Cyril of Jerusalem. It is somewhat disturbing to the sensibilities of those who seemed drugged by the soft Christmas music playing in the mall.

The Savior will not come to be judged again, but to judge those by whom he was judged. At his own judgment he was silent; then he will address those who committed the outrages against him when they crucified him and will remind them:

“You did these things, and I was silent. His first coming was to fulfill his plan of love, to teach men by gentle persuasion. This time, whether men like it or not, they will be subjects of his kingdom by necessity.”

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

I recognize how difficult these words are, and I include myself in that difficulty. It is almost impossible to make a transition from the sweetness of the moment to the sheer dread that might be associated with the thoughts of judgment. But there is something important in recognizing the incongruity of these elements of the revelation of God in Christ.

Perhaps the most disconcerting is not the image of judgment. We have special mental powers (or defects) that can completely dismiss this notion without any apparent loss of devotion. That is amazing but true. I can claim that my sins are not serious or, better yet, I can just put the idea of judgment out of my mind.

Remember when you were a little kid and broke out the neighbor's window in a ball game. Did you go home and fret over the impending judgment that would occur when all the adults came home, or did you just continue your game or go fishing in the creek? We have the power to just put it out of our mind.

The greatest potential loss in the Christmas experience is simply what fades away. Is there even the slightest hope that we can keep alive the scene of the savior's birth? When we were children we wanted Christmas to last. And after shopping and wrapping all those presents we might, as adults, like it to last just a little longer than the half hour it takes to pull off all the paper and lose the parts under the resulting pile. But it is just like everything sweet and wonderful. It just fades away.

Actually, if you look at all the details of the birth, surprisingly they have more to do with proofs that Jesus was the Messiah than anything else. It is perhaps shocking to realize that not much in the Christmas story is intended to draw a tear. The time of the birth, the shepherds, even the birth in Bethlehem, the "city of David" to whom the promise of the Messiah was given, the magi (wise men/kings) and even the swaddling clothes and the manger are all details of the prophecy of the Messiah.

Once we realize that, we can certainly ask what difference it makes. We would need to understand more of who the Messiah is and what is his reason for coming. And that has to do with healing and forgiveness, with the restoration of the relationship that God intends us to have with him, or the mission of the Church to help people and with getting our world back on the right track. If we see Christmas as a passing sentiment, we have missed the point.

"Christian, remember your dignity, and now that you share in God's own nature, do not return by sin to your former base condition. Bear in mind who is your head and of whose body you are a member. Do not forget that you have been rescued from the power of darkness and brought into the light of God's kingdom."

(St. Augustine)