

## 32nd Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A

Every Sunday in the Creed we say that we believe that the risen Jesus 'will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end'. In the First Reading of today's Mass (1Thessalonians 4:13-18), Saint Paul speaks about the Coming of the Lord in traditional dramatic imagery including the blasting of trumpets and the thundering voice of an archangel. You would remember Luke's dramatic account of the Ascension in the first chapter of the Acts. Jesus leaves the apostles and enters into the presence of God, described in the traditional image of a cloud. The apostles are told: 'This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven'(Acts 1:11). The Letter to the Hebrews says that Christ will appear a second time to save those who are eagerly waiting for him'(Hebrews 9:28). The Book of the Apocalypse ends with the risen Christ promising to come soon, to which the assembled community responds: 'Amen. Come, Lord Jesus'(Revelation 22:20 - Marana tha - see 1Corinthians 16:22). In today's Gospel Jesus speaks in terms of a marriage feast and warns us to be ready 'for you do not know either the day or the hour'(Matthew 25:13). When we get behind the imagery, what do we mean when we say that we believe that Jesus is coming again in glory? What are we waiting for?

The New Testament sometimes speaks of the expected coming of Jesus as his parousia - a Greek word that can be translated 'presence' or 'coming'. When the representative of the emperor paid an official visit to a city, it was referred to as a parousia. The Latin equivalent is adventus, whence our English word 'Advent'. God is the source of all life, so God has been present in the world, God's Spirit has been coming into the world since the beginning of time. When a Mum and Dad are waiting for the birth of their child, in a real sense they are waiting for the coming of the Lord in this special graced way. We are always waiting for God's coming and God is constantly entering our world and our lives in a million graced ways.

In a most special way God came into our world in Jesus. He is God's word-made-flesh, and when as Christians we speak of the coming of the Lord it is to the Incarnation that we are especially referring. God's parousia happened in its fullness in the person of Jesus, whose life-giving, love-giving, and self-giving finally and perfectly revealed God as love. Saint Paul wrote his letters after the death of Jesus. When he speaks about the coming of the Lord, he is referring not to the Incarnation but to another coming to which he and his community were looking forward.

What we said of God earlier we can say of Jesus. He is always coming into our world as he graces us with his love and sends his Spirit to forgive and nourish us on our journey. When we came here this morning we came looking forward to his coming among us in the sacrament of the Eucharist and to our intimate meeting with him in communion. This is an essential element of Christian longing. In a special way we are looking forward to his coming to each of us when we pass through death. Our hope is that he will come to us and take us to join him in the glory of God's eternal embrace. This is what the New Testament means when it speaks of the resurrection of Jesus as the first-fruits of God's harvest (1Corinthians 15:20; Colossians 1:18). Jesus had to pass through death before been raised to the fullness of life. So must each of us. We die and rise to a new life in a sacramental way in baptism. But we do it finally when we, like Jesus, come to our death. Our hope is that

Jesus will come again to us and unite us to him forever in love. That is the marriage feast of which Jesus speaks in today's Gospel.

As Saint Paul reminds us: 'Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself' (Philippians 3:20-21). 'Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1Corinthians 13:12).

This is this essential truth that is defined in the dogma of the Assumption of Mary. Mary, the perfect disciple redeemed by her Son, is with God in the whole of her renewed humanity. What has happened for our Mother will happen for all who do the will of his Father, all those whom Jesus speaks of as his brothers and sisters (Mark 3:35). We are encouraged by Jesus' words to the dying thief: 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43).

Of course we cannot accurately describe paradise. To do so we would have to describe God. That is why the Scriptures have recourse to dramatic images, such as that of the marriage banquet used by Jesus in today's Gospel. We cannot accurately describe God, for, as the Beloved disciple reminds us, 'no one has ever seen God' (John 1:18). And if we cannot accurately describe God, we cannot accurately describe the experience of God which we will have in heaven. Paul reminds us of 'what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him' (1Corinthians 2:9). The best we can do is believe with Saint Paul that 'we shall stay with the Lord for ever' (1Thessalonians 4:17; see Philippians 1:23); and with Saint John that 'when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is' (1John 3:2). We are encouraged by Jesus prayer at the Last Supper: 'Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory' (John 17:24).

So when we look forward to the coming of Jesus, we are thinking of the personal encounter at the time of our death. But there is more to it than that. Our hope is not just a personal one. We believe that the whole of creation is meant to reveal the glory of God, and so we look forward to history reaching its goal when all evil will be conquered and creation will be what God wants it to be, full of the glory of God. Here, even more, we must rely on poetic and dramatic images, for we cannot imagine what this might mean. When we declare our faith in this final coming of the Lord Jesus, we are asserting that Jesus came into this world through the Incarnation to renew the whole of the cosmos and the whole of human history. It reminds us to keep on with the mission that he entrusted to us, leaving to God the unfolding of the mystery. Jesus is constantly coming into the world. Our ultimate hope is that the world will come to Jesus. Then his presence, which is continuous throughout history, will break through into the full light and be fully and finally revealed. In a real sense, because we are not separate individuals but are persons who belong to each other and to the world, until this fullness of God's glory is manifest in the whole of the created universe, our salvation is incomplete. We cannot be completely happy so long as creation is still groaning, as Paul expresses it, 'in one great act of giving birth' (Romans 8:22). When we say we believe that Jesus will come again in glory we are looking forward to the completion on the cosmic scale of the process began in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus. It was for this that Jesus was praying in the 'Our Father' when he asked us to join him in

saying: 'Your kingdom come'(Matthew 6:10). We are not giving expression to an optimistic view of the progress of evolution. We are making an act of faith in what God is doing in history. We are speaking of the goal of grace, confident that ultimately, at a time and in a way that we cannot imagine, God's love will finally triumph. We are saying that light will conquer darkness love will conquer hatred, and grace will conquer sin. On that day of grace Jesus, our Risen Lord, will be seen for who he is: 'the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and earth were created'(Colossians 1:15-16).

This hope is not meant to distract us from the human project made possible through the gracious love of Jesus. While we long for the end of suffering and sin and the fullness of joy and peace, we are to keep our minds and hearts open to the Spirit which the Risen Christ is constantly pouring into our hearts. For Jesus is calling each of us to an ever deeper communion with God. We are called, in other words, to holiness. This is Paul's prayer a few verses prior to today's reading: 'May he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints'(1Thessalonians 3:13). He concludes his Letter on the same note: 'May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ'(1Thessalonians 5:24).

The Vatican Council reminded us that we are all called to a life of holiness, each in his or her particular way of life. This holiness consists in tending to the perfection of love. 'As the Day of the Lord approaches, we are to spend our time in love (Hebrews 10:24-25). John reminds us that while the fullness of glory is not yet ours, 'the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining'(1John 2:8). In this time we are to carry out the commandment of love given us by Jesus: 'Love one another as I have loved you'(John 13:34). Let us continue to commit ourselves to this love as we 'await with patience'(Romans 8:25) our personal encounter with Christ at the end of our lives and as we work for the purification and sanctification of our world (see GS n 38-39).

All this is most beautifully expressed here in our Sunday Eucharist. Here we are in the closest communion with Jesus. Here we are in the closest communion with those who have gone before us and are being purified by God's love to prepare them for the fullness of eternal glory. And here we are in the closest union with the saints in heaven. Furthermore it is here that we come together to be nourished so that we can carry on the mission of Jesus to the world. As Paul says: 'As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes'(1Cor. 11:26).