

### 33rd Sunday of the Year, Year C

Next Sunday is the last Sunday of the liturgical year - the Feast of Christ the King. Today the Church is inviting us, in the words of Psalm 98, to pull out all our musical instruments and to invite the whole of creation to join us in celebrating the Coming of the Lord:

‘Sing psalms to the Lord with the harp, with the sound of music.  
With trumpets and the sound of the horn acclaim the King, the Lord.  
Let the sea and all within it thunder, the world and all its peoples.  
Let the rivers clap their hands and the hills ring out their joy at the presence of the Lord.  
For the Lord is coming. He is coming to rule the earth’(Psalm 98:5-8).

In the imagination of Jesus’ contemporaries, there was a close connection between resurrection and God’s ultimate judgment in which the whole of creation, purged of evil, would be renewed. They spoke of a new heaven and a new earth in which there would be no evil because God’s kingdom had come and God’s will was being done by the whole of creation. They associated this with the coming of the risen Christ in glory, and, since Jesus had already risen, they naturally expected that the goal of history was imminent. In the final words of the Book of Revelation (sometimes called by its Greek title ‘The Apocalypse’), the risen Jesus declares: ‘Surely, I am coming soon’(22:7, 12, 20), and the author on behalf of the Christian community, responds with the prayer: ‘Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!’ (Revelation 22:20).

Also in the Apocalypse there is a beautiful stanza in which the Spirit of Jesus and the whole Church appeals to everyone, especially to members of the Christian community: ‘The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ Let everyone who hears say, ‘Come!’ Let everyone who is thirsty come. Come and receive freely the water of life’(Rev 22:17).

It is obvious two thousand years later that there is no close temporal connection between the resurrection of Jesus and his coming in glory, yet in the Creed which we pronounce each Sunday we still say: ‘He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.’ How do we understand the ‘Coming of the Lord’, and why is the Church wanting to whip up enthusiasm for it as this liturgical year draws to a close? Nine hundred years ago, Saint Bernard asked the same question, and answered by distinguishing three ways in which Jesus is said to come into this world: ‘We know a threefold coming of the Lord. ... In the first coming, he came in the weakness of human nature, in this intermediate coming he comes in the power of the Spirit, and in the final coming he will come in the majesty of glory. Therefore this intermediate coming is, as it were, a way of connecting the first coming to the final coming. In the first coming Christ was our redeemer, in the final coming he will reveal himself as our life, in this present coming he is our rest and our consolation’(Bernard, Sermon 5 on Advent).

Jesus’ first coming is a matter of history. We recall his life and his teaching each Sunday in the Gospel. His final coming is a matter of hope. We have no idea of when this will be. Everyone who has ever claimed that the end of the world was about to happen has been proved wrong. Jesus told his disciples to leave the timing of it to God. He had no idea about it himself and didn’t want them wasting their time speculating about it: ‘About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven nor the Son, but only the Father’(Matthew 24:36). In today’s Gospel, Jesus warns his disciples against those who would see in natural disasters or

persecution signs of the coming of the end. He tells them not to be deceived by people who claim that the 'the time is near at hand'.

When we declare our faith in this final coming of Jesus we are saying that we believe that evil will not ultimately triumph. This is not a vindictive feeling, hoping that evil will be punished. Evil is self-destructive. There is no need for an added punishment. If we commit evil and obstinately refuse to repent of it, we reject God, and if we stubbornly insist on this rejection, we cannot respond to love. This self-inflicted deprivation of love is the essence of what we call 'hell'. No, we are not looking to see evil punished. Our hope is that we and others will be changed by grace to cease oppressing and hurting others, and that love will triumph. We want oppression to cease by everyone repenting of sin and opening their hearts to grace and to love. As the Entrance Antiphon states, drawing on God's words spoken through the prophet Jeremiah (29:11-14): 'My plans for you are peace and not disaster; when you call to me I will listen to you, and I will bring you back from the place to which I exiled you'.

The First Reading is a promise that 'the sun of justice will shine out with healing in its rays'(Malachi 3:20). We want this healing for ourselves and for everyone. As Paul says in the Second Reading, salvation is not some magical force that comes from outside and snatches us to freedom. It is a healing that enables us to produce the fruit of love in our lives. We want this healing and this fruit for everyone.

By believing in the final coming of the risen Christ, we are saying that all who follow Jesus will be raised to life with him. We are saying that God's life-giving love cannot ultimately be thwarted by human sin. We are saying that oppression and injustice will cease. We are declaring our faith in what we call 'heaven'. We are reminding ourselves of the goal of this life when all our deepest longings will be fulfilled - provided, that is, we do not allow ourselves to be totally distracted and give in to soul-destroying behaviour. We need to be reminded that, in the words of the Book of Revelation, Jesus, the Good Shepherd: 'will guide us to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes'(Revelation 7:17). 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away'(Revelation 21:4). Our souls need to hear again that we are made for love and that we will enjoy eternal communion with the God who loves us and with all whose hearts have been open to love in this life. Paul speaks 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).

We remember Jesus' first coming and we look forward to his final coming, so that we may be attentive to his constant coming into our lives through the gift of his Spirit. It is this intermediate coming that is the key focus of the liturgy. We experience this coming here in the Eucharist. He comes to welcome us through the sacrament of bread and wine. He comes to nourish us with his love and to fill our souls with his Spirit. He comes to bind us together as a community of prayer and love. We experience his coming in the sacrament of reconciliation in which he purifies our hearts through words of forgiveness and healing. In humility we name our sin, and he loves our sin away. We experience his coming in all the events of our lives.

Just as in any relationship we need to spend significant time together to enjoy true communion, so we need to give quality time to being in prayer and allowing Jesus to come to us and share with us his communion with God. Then we can be sensitised to the many ways in which he

comes to us in grace and inspires us throughout our daily life. All of this is celebrated as we recall his coming into the world. No wonder the Church wants us to combine all our instruments and join the chorus of creation in singing our song of joy. Jesus once walked our streets. He revealed God as a God of love and he showed us how to respond to grace. One day (we know not when) everyone will see that Jesus was right, and so we pray that we will respond to grace and so enjoy the communion for which we long. In the meantime, as this liturgical year draws to a close, we are reminded to examine our lives to see how sensitive we are to his constant coming into our lives.

Let us conclude with a prayer from the Jewish Passover Liturgy (quoted by Luis Alonso Schökel SJ, *I Salmi* Volume 2, page 357).

'Were our mouths as full of hymns as the ocean is full of water,  
were the songs on our lips as numerous as the waves in the sea,  
were our lips as extensive in praise as are the heavens,  
our eyes as luminous as the sun and the moon,  
and our feet as fast as those of a deer,  
we would be unable to thank you, O Lord our God,  
for only one of the myriads of kind actions, wonders and marvels  
which you have done for us and for those who have gone before us  
throughout the journey of our history.'