

SERMON NOTES

Third Sunday of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Synaxis Gospel
Matthew 24:30-36

THE SECOND ADVENT OF CHRIST PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

At Christmas time, we celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ more than 2000 years ago. God joined Himself to us by taking on our humanity. That was His first Advent, or His first coming. The passage before us deals with what we refer to as the Second Advent of Christ, or His Second Coming. At that future time, Jesus Christ will return to earth as its undisputed King. Jesus called the Second Advent: “The Coming of the Son of Man.”

The Jews of Jesus’ day were expecting the *Coming of the Son of Man* at any moment. Their prophets had foretold it and the prophet Daniel had even given a timetable for its accomplishment.¹ Therefore, 2000 years ago, there was a frenzy of expectation that the time had arrived. What were they expecting?

The Jews were expecting a day of judgment (the *Day of the LORD*) and they were expecting the reign of God on earth; the perfect King will usher in a time of perfect peace for both man and animals. The King will be a descendent of their great King David and all nations will bow to His authority. Their nation, chosen by God as the King’s ethnic family, would hold the position of honor among all the peoples of the earth.

One of the major reasons that the Jewish people rejected Jesus as their Christ is that they did not see the fulfillment of their expectations during Christ’s First Advent 2000 years ago. Modern day Jews reject Jesus Christ for the same reason. Therefore, they are still waiting. While there are some Jewish-Christians today, most Jewish people do not understand that the prophecies also foretold that the *Servant of the LORD*, Who would suffer for the iniquities of us all, would be, in fact, their promised glorious King.

Chapters 24 and 25 cover Jesus’ most extensive teaching of the *Coming of the Son of Man* in the Gospel of Matthew. In the Armenian Church, we read almost the identical

¹ Daniel 9:24-27. The Jews had rightly understood the time code and knew that the years were accomplished for the coming of their King. Notice in verse 26, that Jerusalem and the Temple were to be destroyed after the coming of the Messiah (Who would be cut off – killed). This destruction occurred in 70 AD, c. 40 years after the Crucifixion. It is strange that men, who could count the years and pinpoint the Advent of Christ from this prophecy, did not understand that it also pointed to His death and the later destruction of the Temple.

portions of Matthew 24 on three Sundays: once in September, once in October, and the third time during the Opening of the Doors ceremony on Easter Sunday. It is also scheduled for reading on particular week-days. Thus, we recognize that this is a very significant passage of Scripture. Because we will be reading this passage again in four weeks, today we will concentrate on Jesus' teaching concerning the timing of His return, and what events *we* should expect in the period just preceding that momentous event. Part Two, in October, will delve into *Christ's* expectations for us while we wait, and His warnings that we should be vigilant.

Our reading is a portion of what is referred to as the Olivet Discourse, the last of the five major speeches of Christ. It is called the Olivet Discourse because its setting is the Mount of Olives, overlooking Jerusalem. The time is just two days before the Crucifixion, during the period we call Holy Week. Jesus has left Jerusalem after His final conflict with the religious authorities. The preceding three chapters of Matthew record that conflict beginning with Palm Sunday, when Jesus cleansed the Temple. The conflict ends with the woes Jesus pronounced upon those who continue in the hypocrisy of the religious authorities, who, like their forefathers, killed the prophets God sent to them. Now for their last treachery (Jesus knew they hated Him and plotted to kill Him), Jesus said to them:

*"Consequently you bear witness against yourselves, that you are descendents of those who murdered the prophets and fill up the measure of the guilt of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how shall you escape the sentence of Hell!"*²

As they were leaving Jerusalem, Jesus mourned over the city that He knew would soon experience judgment because they had rejected Him. When the disciples pointed out the beautiful Temple, He told them it too would be totally destroyed. The disciples must have realized that the destruction of the Temple meant God's judgment upon Israel. They were intensely interested to know 1) when this would happen, and 2) what would be the "sign of Your coming and the end of the age." Jesus' answer to their two questions is the Olivet Discourse.

Jesus begins the discourse by indicating that He will not be physically present during the terrible days which will begin in the disciples' lifetime. Thus, He warns them that many will claim to be Christ during that time and will mislead many people, but *Jesus'* followers should not believe it. During that time there will be wars, and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes. Christians will be persecuted and killed because of their faith. Because of the intense persecution some of them will even fall away from the faith, hating and turning each other in to the authorities. Because of the increasing lawlessness (the abandonment of the moral code of God), the love of many will grow cold. The period will not end until the Gospel is preached to all nations.³

² Matthew 23:31

³ The Wycliff Bible Translators in their newsletter, "Front Lines", Fall, 2008, report that there remain about 2000 language groups that are still without the Bible in the language they know best. They have language

Jesus then turns to the question concerning the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem. When the disciples see “the abomination of desolation standing in the Holy Place” they should immediately flee to the mountains,⁴ because there will then occur a horrendous tribulation unlike the world had ever seen or ever will.⁵ Jesus added that the days of tribulation will be cut short for the sake of the elect (God’s people), else all life would perish. Jesus again warns the disciples that during this terrible time they should not be deceived by those who say the Christ has come, because when He does come, it will not be in secret, the whole world will know it. “Just as the lightning comes from the east, and flashes even to the west so shall the coming of the Son of Man be.”⁶ Our reading begins at this point in the discussion.

SYNAXIS READING

Matthew 24: 30-36

“And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky,

and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and with great glory.

And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.

Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender, and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; even so you

teams working “to see a Bible translation program in progress in every language still needing one by 2025.” By God’s grace, it may be sooner.

⁴ Daniel’s prophecy was fulfilled for the first time when Antiochus Epiphanes, a Seleucid King of the Hellenistic Syrian Kingdom who reigned from 175 to 164 BC, set up a statue of Zeus in the Holy Place of the Temple. When the Emperor Caligula came to power (AD 37- 41), he demanded that a statue of himself be placed in the Jewish Temple and be worshipped. This order was not obeyed. He was followed by Claudius (AD 41-54), who in turn was followed by the Emperor Nero (AD 54-68). The revolt that led to the destruction of the Temple was a result of Nero’s Roman Procurator’s robbery of the Temple Treasury. He later slaughtered 3000 Jews in Jerusalem who were celebrating Pentecost. What exactly constituted the “abomination of desolation” during the years AD 67-68 cannot be found in the histories of that time. However, the Jewish historian, Josephus indicates that the unnamed sacrilege was performed by the Zealot Jews who, after driving out the Romans, committed all sorts of vile acts, including murder within the sacred precincts. War IV, vi, 3.

⁵ This greatest tribulation the world will ever experience will be the Great Tribulation just before the return of Christ. Jesus may be here using the tribulation that began in AD 70 as a type of the Great Tribulation. Another thought: the AD 70 tribulation has lasted 2000 years in terms of the suffering of God’s people, which has been non-stop in one part of the world or another.

⁶ Matthew 24:27

too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door.

Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away.

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of Heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.”

NOTES

“And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky,

The *Son of Man* references all have their source in the following passage from Daniel. It is a vision that Daniel saw of the end time. The “Ancient of Days” is of course the Father in Heaven and the “Son of Man” is God incarnate since “the clouds of heaven” signify the accompaniment of Deity. This is why, when Jesus used this term *Son of Man* for Himself, He was accused of blasphemy by those who did not believe in Him.⁷

“And behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a son of man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.”⁸

What is the sign? Armenians would think of the Cross because this is our symbol of Christ. However, in the New Testament, the Cross stands more for the completed work of Christ in accomplishing our salvation; one might say of the Gospel of Christ. Moreover, Christ did not return when, according to tradition, a huge Cross was seen in the sky above Jerusalem during the fourth century.

The word translated *sign* can mean one of several options: 1) the sign or distinguishing mark by which something is known, token, or indication. Here we might think of the Cross. But a sign can also be a signal previously agreed upon. The event itself—the actual second coming of Christ—would fall into this category. The event would be the sign of the true identity of Jesus Christ; 2) a sign consisting of a wonder or miracle, an event that is contrary to the usual course of nature. Again, the event of Christ’s coming would be such a sign. So perhaps, the sign is not the appearance of a Cross in the sky, but of Christ Himself coming in His glory.

and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn,

Some scholars see this as an adaptation of Zachariah 12:10. However, that passage refers to the repentance of the nation Israel that “pierced” God. “All tribes of the earth” seems to refer back to

⁷ Matthew 26:64-65

⁸ Daniel 7:13-14

Matthew 24:14 which states that the Gospel will be preached to “the whole world as a witness to all the nations.” When they see the One coming in judgment that they rejected as Savior, they will indeed mourn. This is also consistent with Revelation 6:15:

And the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb.”

and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and with great glory.

This is again a reference to Daniel 7:13-14 quoted above. Notice that “all the tribes of the earth” will see Him coming. This appearance will be seen world-wide. When He appears, all will recognize His Deity and cringe before the Almighty.

And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET

The Son of Man, because He is God, rightly commands His angels.

The trumpet in the Old and New Testaments was often sounded to gather together the people of God.⁹

and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect¹⁰

Earlier, Jesus had taught that the Son of Man will command His angels to gather up all of the unrighteous in the world and cast them into the fire.¹¹ Here, before judging the rest of the world He commands them to gather to safety those who belong to Him.

from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.

This figure of speech indicates that those whose faith is in Christ will come from all corners of the world. In our day, we can see that this figure would cover even those on missions in space.

Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender, and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; even so you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door.

The Greek text is ambiguous here, and could be translated “it is near” rather than “He is near.” In this case, “all these things” should be seen as referring back to the events preceding the destruction of the Temple in answer to the first question of the disciples; not to the time of the appearing of Christ, which was their second question.

Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.

Below, Jesus will state that only the Father knows the date of His return. “All these things” therefore cannot refer to the return. The destruction of the Temple was in AD 70. A generation was considered to be 40 years. Jesus was crucified, by most reckonings, after AD 30. The

⁹Exodus 19:16-19; Deuteronomy 30:4; Isaiah 27:13; 1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

¹⁰ See note 9 above.

¹¹Matthew 13:4

destruction of the Temple in AD 70 fell just at the end of that generation, contemporary to the disciples. The term should not be stretched to mean something else.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away.

The word of God is more lasting than the universe. We can count on the truth that is unshakable. The language used by Jesus with reference to His words reflects the same concept that was used in the Old Testament with reference to the permanence of the words of the LORD God Almighty.

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in Heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.”

With reference to the great Day of Judgment when Christ returns as King, the answer to the disciples’ second question could not be given in terms of time. They could rest assured that He most certainly would return. Moreover, when He did return, He would gather them to safety before His terrible judgment fell on the world that had rejected His gracious offer of salvation.

When God incarnated Himself as Jesus Christ, we are told that He “emptied Himself”¹² to take on the form of a man. God functioning as the Father has different responsibilities from God functioning as the Son. The function of the Son was to rely completely on the Father for everything. The Father makes known to the Son all that He needs to function in the purpose of God for our salvation. Here we see that this did not include the date of the Second Advent. It is not a part of the function of God Incarnate to have this information.

APPLICATION

The great Day of the LORD, or the day when God will sit in final and awful judgment on the unrighteous, was a prominent, well known theme of the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., Old Testament prophets. The Israelites looked forward to that day because they thought that it would be a day when God would destroy *their* enemies. They believed that they were the favored ones and were thereby exempt from the condemnation that would fall on the rest of the world. They believed that their nation would in that day come into its rightful place of preeminence and the rest of the nations would serve them.

That bubble burst when such prophets as Joel warned that Judah’s relationship to the Day of the LORD depended on its spiritual condition.¹³ A disobedient nation of Judah faced wrath along with the rest. Only repentance could turn that day into one of spiritual renewal and deliverance.¹⁴ The disobedient nation was treated to a foretaste of that great Day of the LORD when Solomon’s Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., and the people of Jerusalem were taken away into seventy years of captivity because of their sins.

In our reading, the disciples have concluded what Jesus’ prophecy of the destruction of the Second Temple meant: The Day of the LORD, Judgment Day! But Jesus indicates that the two events, the imminent destruction of the Temple and the Day of the LORD are separate events. The first can be accurately fixed in time, but the timing of the second,

¹² Philippians 2:7

¹³ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *Interpreting the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), p. 66-67.

¹⁴ Ibid

His return as Judge and King of all the world, is known only by the Father. It could come at any moment.

Until that great day of His return in power and great glory, Jesus' followers will suffer terribly. Evil men and false prophets will attempt to lead them astray from faith in their Savior. Therefore, such events that have happened to our own Armenian nation should not surprise us. Our Lord told the disciples *and us* to expect it. It should not seem strange or odd to us that Christians are persecuted and killed. It should not cause us to be bewildered, to waver in our faith, or even lose our faith altogether. No, no, this was all foretold. Our Lord in His great love for us has prepared us for these things.

It was not a coincidence that on the day preceding the night of His trial, Jesus taught the Olivet Discourse on the very mountain where He would shortly be arrested and led before Pontius Pilate to be condemned and crucified. The Judge of the whole world would soon give His life in order to save the world from the wrath that would inexorably come to those who reject Him and the salvation He offers.

But looking ahead, our Lord saw the un-repentance of the religious leaders and the people that followed them. He saw the persecution and terrible suffering that would befall those who love and follow Him. Though He knew what would certainly happen to them, He protected His beloved ones from doubt and bewilderment and dismay by telling them beforehand what to expect. He prepared them so they would be able to endure.

Finally, He gave them the hope and the assurance that He would most certainly return in all the Heavenly power and glory that is rightfully His. On that stupendous day, when the entire world will see Him and the unrighteous will beat their breasts in regret and cower in fear of the judgment that must fall, His first act will be to gather His beloved ones to Himself. The wrath of God, the Judge, will never, no, never, touch those who have trusted in Him as their God and Savior.

May this reading give us the courage to live for God even in the small things of life: in our family relationships, at work, at school, in public, in private; to cling to Him no matter what the cost to our pride or our lives. In the great persecution that may face us, let us remember those of our people and others who have valiantly gone on before us and who, in the face of death, did not falter in their faith in Christ. May we, in love and obedience to our Lord, continue to carry the wonderful message of God's salvation to every nation on earth with our words and by our gracious conduct.

When the great Trumpet sounds, may we all be joyfully gathered together in the Beloved as the victorious people of God, blessed forevermore.