

## SERMON NOTES

Seventh Sunday of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Synaxis Gospel  
Matthew 24:27-36

### THE SECOND ADVENT OF CHRIST PART TWO – THE ADMONITIONS

#### INTRODUCTION

Our reading for this Sunday is a portion of *The Olivet Discourse*, the last of the five major speeches of Christ. The setting is the Mount of Olives, overlooking Jerusalem. The Discourse records a private discussion between our Lord and the disciples and it is Jesus' answer to their questions about the end times.

Our reading is almost identical to that appointed for the last week in September. The topic for both Sundays is the Second Advent of Christ, also known as Christ's Second Coming. Our Lord referred to the event as the "Coming of the Son of Man." The Jews were familiar with another title for the event. They called it "The Day of the LORD."

Because of this repetition of our liturgical Gospel reading, we divided the message into two parts. Last month we discussed the following points:

- 1) The First Advent was the birth of Jesus. He will return in the Second Advent as the undisputed King and Judge of all mankind.
- 2) The Jewish people of Jesus' era expected this prophesied 'Coming' to begin the Reign of God on earth, a time of perfect peace for both man and animals. What they did not anticipate (and most Jewish people do not accept today) was the First Advent with its purpose of grace and salvation.
- 3) The disciples' questions combined two issues, but Our Lord separated the Second Coming issue from the Destruction of the Temple issue. He pinpointed the timing of the Temple's destruction, which occurred in AD 70, to their generation. The timing of the Second Coming was, and is, unknowable to men.
- 4) During the waiting period preceding the Second Coming, Christians can expect to suffer great persecutions not only from the unbelievers outside the Church, but also from those who turn from the faith within the congregation of the Church.

This Sunday, our focus will be upon admonitions Jesus gave to His disciples concerning what our Lord expects from *us*, indeed what is vital for us, during the waiting period preceding His return to earth. The waiting period has lasted almost 2000 years, but every generation, including our own, was warned to expect it at any moment. We must be prepared!

## SYNTAXIS READING

Matthew 24:27-36

*“For just as the lightning comes from the east, and flashes even to the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be.*

*“Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.*

*“But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken,*

*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 too, when you see all these things, recognize that He [it] 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

**“For just as the lightning comes from the east, and flashes even to the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be.**

Jesus again warns the disciples that, during the terrible time of tribulation, they should not be deceived by those who say the Christ has come. When He comes, it will not be in secret; the

whole world will know it. Just as the flash of lightning in the sky is visible to all, so His return will be visible to all.

### Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

Jesus often used agricultural and shepherding metaphors to which His listeners could relate. A vulture or a group of vultures circling around in the sky indicates that an animal is in its death throes. Destruction is upon it. Similarly, the appearance of certain signs listed below will signal that time has run out for the dying and unbelieving world.<sup>1</sup>

Vultures depicted devouring the flesh of the judged was common in the prophecies of the Day of the LORD. The disciples and the early Church's readers would have grasped the reference easily.

### But immediately after the tribulation of those days

"Those days" refers to the waiting time period before the Second Advent.

### *THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL* from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken,

This is an approximate quotation from Isaiah 13:10 or Joel 2:10. These cosmic phenomena will occur on the Day of the LORD. The Day is further described as a "day of the fury of the LORD," a day of "His burning anger;" a day when "He will exterminate its sinners" from the land. It will be a day when He "will punish the world for its evil and the wicked for their iniquity."<sup>2</sup>

### 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:

*"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 shall not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed."<sup>3</sup>*

This is a vision that Daniel saw of the end time. The "Ancient of Days" is the Father<sup>4</sup> in Heaven; the "Son of Man" is God incarnate. "The clouds of heaven" signify the Presence of Deity—they accompany Him. Thus, when Jesus identified Himself as the "Son of Man," He was accused of blasphemy.<sup>5</sup>

### 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

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<sup>1</sup> The figure of the vulture, as a tool of the destruction God's wrath and judgment brings, is used also in Ezekiel 39:17 and Habakkuk 1:8.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Isaiah 24:23; Ezekiel 32:17 (also contains the figure of birds feeding on the flesh of men judged by God); Joel 2:10, 31; 3:15ff; Amos 5:20; 8:9; Zephaniah 1:14-18.

Note also Revelation 8:12-13 in which the bird and the heavenly bodies are involved.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel 7:13-14

<sup>4</sup> In Daniel 7:9, the "Ancient of Days" is described: "His vesture was white like snow, and the hair of His head like pure wool." In Revelation 1:14, the glorified Jesus Christ is described similarly: "His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow." In John 14:8-9, Thomas asked Jesus, "Show us the Father." Jesus replied, "If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father." The vision of Daniel 7 is an example of God manifesting Himself in two forms at the same time.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 26:64-65

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. Compare 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 . . .”*

Jesus Christ is “the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sins of the world.”<sup>6</sup> It is tragic that these people only recognize the fact after it is too late.

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

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

with *A GREAT TRUMPET*

The trumpet in the Old and New Testaments was often sounded to gather together the people of God.<sup>7</sup>

and *THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER* His elect

Earlier,<sup>8</sup> 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. 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 could 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 [it] is near, right at the door.

The Greek text is ambiguous here, and could be translated “it is near” rather than “He is near.” If understood as “it is near”, “all these things” should be seen as referring back to the events<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John 1:29

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 19:16-19; Deuteronomy 30:4; Is 27:13; 1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 13:41

<sup>9</sup> The waiting period for the Second Advent began with Christ’s Ascension, and the persecutions and preaching efforts are characteristic of the entire period before and after the fall of the Jerusalem Temple in AD 70. However, there were specific events that signaled the fall of the Temple. For these, see verses 15-22. The sacrilege, ‘the abomination of desolations’, literally, ‘the abomination that causes horror’, mentioned in verse 15 may have been the desecrations perpetrated in the Temple Sanctuary by the Zealots

preceding the destruction of the Temple in answer to the first question of the disciples. They should not be seen as referring to *the time* of Christ's coming as judge, which was their second question. In other words, verses 27 through 31 should be seen as an explanation of why the disciples should not believe it when people make claims about the Christ having come during the tribulation period before the destruction of the Temple and afterwards.

However, with the parable of the fig tree, Jesus returns to His warnings about the impending destruction of the Temple.

If the expression is taken as "He is near," "all these things" would include the persecutions, the spreading of the Gospel, the false christs, the destruction of the Temple and the signs in the sky. In this case "He is near" would refer to the Second Advent. However, the next verses seem to eliminate this option.

**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. Taken together with the 'generation' statement, "all these things" cannot refer to the return and cannot include the signs in the sky just preceding our Lord's return in the Second Advent. Even Jesus, in His humanity, did not know in what generation's time He would return.<sup>10</sup>

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 destruction of the Temple in AD 70 fell just at the end of that generation, contemporary to the disciples. The term 'generation' 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 own 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.<sup>11</sup>

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

The answer to the disciples' second question with reference to the great Day of Judgment when Christ returns as King could not be given in terms of time. They could rest assured that He most certainly would return. Moreover, when He does return, He will gather those who love Him to safety before His terrible judgment falls on the world that rejected His gracious offer of salvation.

The Incarnation of God was subjected to the limitations of a man. Therefore, Jesus' power and His knowledge were completely dependent on the Father's endowment. This has to do with the function of the Incarnation. Here, we see that the Father has withheld the information concerning His return from His Incarnation, perhaps because that knowledge was not a part of the Incarnation's function.

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in the years AD 67-68. These culminated in their crowning a buffoon as High Priest amidst ribald mirth to the horror of the religious people. Josephus, *The Jewish War* (New York: Dorset Press, 1981), pp.244-45.

<sup>10</sup> This should not seem strange because Jesus as God knows everything. However, over and over Jesus as Man emphasized that He was completely dependent upon the Father for His power and His words. He spoke and acted only at the direction of the Father. Cf. John 5:19, 30; 14:9-10, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Psalm 119:160; Isaiah 40:6ff.

## APPLICATION

The great *Day of the LORD*, the Second Advent of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, will most certainly come, but the timing of this awesome Day, His return as Judge and King of the world, is known only to the Father. It could come at any moment.

Looking ahead, our Lord saw the persecution and terrible suffering that would befall those who love and follow Him. He protected His beloved ones from doubt, bewilderment, and dismay by telling them beforehand what to expect. He prepared them so they would be able to endure with hope.

Our Sunday readings do not cover the entire Olivet Discourse. However, as the famous news commentator Paul Harvey, says, we need to “know the rest of the story.” When that Day comes, at first, everyone will be doing what they normally do, just as on September 11, 2001. But then, sudden devastation will fall upon them. The entire unbelieving world will be paralyzed with fear and horror.

Our Lord has an admonition for us, a serious word of warning. We must be alert. We must know this can happen at any moment. We must be prepared. This will allow us to live in hopeful expectation, for He has promised that when He returns, He will gather His beloved safely to Himself first.

Moreover, out of His great love for us, our Lord desires that we should not be ashamed, but blessed at His coming. It is vitally important for us that when He comes, He will find us living and working for Him, prepared to meet Him, in our hearts as well as in our activities. In Matthew 24:43-25:30 of the Olivet Discourse, Jesus gives several examples of what this means.

- 1) The owner of a home, if he knows a thief is coming, will be on the alert to protect his household.  
**Moral:** Don't think, “I have time some other day or some other year, or when I retire.” Get ready for Him today, this very minute! His coming will be as unsuspected as a thief's.
- 2) A *faithful* slave always obeys his master, even when the master is away on a trip.  
**Moral:** Like the faithful slave, always be obedient to God even though you cannot see Him now. What does He want us to do? The two greatest commandments are these: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. Love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus' new commandment was that we should love each other as Christ has loved us, sacrificially. If we control all our actions by these standards, we will be obedient to God.
- 3) A *disobedient* slave mistreated and abused the other slaves over whom he had power. The master came suddenly and the disobedient slave was cast out and severely punished.

**Moral:** A disobedient so-called ‘Christian’ who is unloving will suffer the same fate as an unbeliever when Christ comes.

- 4) Ten bridesmaids were waiting for the groom; five were unprepared and had to go and buy what they needed; they came too late and were shut out of the wedding feast.

**Moral:** Be like the five bridesmaids who *were* prepared and go joyfully to meet the LORD and join in the great banquet prepared for those who love our God.

- 5) A master who left on a journey gave three slaves money. Two of the slaves invested their money so that the master had double when he returned. The third slave did not invest and so he returned only the original amount to the master. The third slave was stripped of the money but the other two were rewarded with more.

**Moral:** Use the talents and resources that God has given you for Him and His kingdom. God will richly reward you. If you refuse, you will lose your blessing when He returns.

Finally, when God sits on the Throne of Judgment on that Day, our Lord said that all the nations will be gathered before Him. Those who have loved and served Him faithfully by caring for our brothers and sisters in need, both physically and spiritually, will enter into the joy of our LORD. Those who have not reflected the love of Christ for others will be cast out from His Presence.<sup>12</sup>

God looks at the heart. To be prepared is to have a clean heart. If an outwardly ‘super Christian’ has a heart that is lustful, or hateful, or jealous, or envious, or harbors grudges or ill-feelings towards another person, or wishes evil on someone else, our Lord sees it. If we are truly faithful, not simply outward Christians, the Holy Spirit will show us the condition of our heart. We must confess our sinfulness and He will cleanse our hearts as He promised.<sup>13</sup>

These warnings and admonitions are very serious indeed. The Christian life we Armenians are called to lead while we await His return is a commitment—mind, heart, and soul—in thankfulness to our Triune God for Christ’s love and sacrifice for us on the Cross. Thus, we do not live this Christian life *in order* to be saved;<sup>14</sup> but we live it *because* we are His.

We cannot claim to share the faith of our Armenian forefathers if we routinely go through the motions of our religion *without* the deep love and devotion to Christ that its founders

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<sup>12</sup> It is not by our superior knowledge of the Scriptures or our speech that we are marked as one of His. It is our actions which flow from our love for Him, even if we are ignorant of their actual Recipient—the LORD Himself—that prove we belong to Him. Cf. Romans 2:14-16, 28, 29.

<sup>13</sup> Psalm 139:23-24; 1 John 1:9

<sup>14</sup> We are not saved by our good deeds; we are saved by Christ’s death for us on the Cross and our trust in Him.

displayed even in the face of death. God has no use for empty religion, no matter how accurately or how beautifully we present it. Salvation results in a love relationship with God. If we love Him we will joyfully worship *and* obey Him.

The message of the Olivet Discourse is that Jesus Christ will most certainly return as the Judge and King of all mankind. It will be a terrible day for those who have rejected Him and a wonderful day for those of us who truly love Him. May we sincerely take His admonitions to heart and on that Day be alert and prepared to meet our glorious Savior at last, face to face. It could happen at any moment, maybe today. May our God find us with clean hearts, living in obedience, with love for Him and for all mankind.

“He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming quickly.’ Amen. Come Lord Jesus.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Revelation 22:20