

SERMON AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

DECEMBER 17, 2023

COLOSSIANS 3: 4-11 LUKE 14 16-24

“JESUS CHRIST WILL COME BACK”

Jesus Christ will come back. In 8 days we will celebrate the first time He came to our world. And He will come back again. God and goodness and life will finally totally win!

We are now in the Advent season. “Advent” means “coming”. And there are two comings of Christ we focus on during these weeks---His first Advent at the first Christmas; and His second Advent when He comes again at the end of the world. Today’s appointed scripture lessons both focus on His Second Advent.

In Colossians 3, St. Paul writes about how Jesus will return to Earth in glory. And we, His people, will also be glorified on that day. He writes in verse 4---“When Christ, who is our life, appears---then you also will appear with Him in glory.” And in Luke 14, our Lord tells a parable about a man giving a big banquet. In the parable, that banquet stands for the joyous day when Christ comes back to us. And the message of the parable is clear---we need to be ready for that banquet. We need to be prepared for the day of Christ’s return.

This belief that Christ will return is a central belief of our Orthodox Christian Faith. It is all over the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments! The Church Fathers and the Saints clearly teach it. And we proclaim our belief in it at every liturgy when we proclaim our ancient Creed from the 300’s A.D.-----“He shall come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.”

It will happen. When will this be? Christ said we can’t know when. So don’t waste time predicting. People have always been predicting and they have always been wrong. As good old Yogi Berra famously said, “It’s tough making predictions, especially about the future.” Very tough, indeed! So it’s not worth trying.....

When the Lord returns, what will He do? Lots---and all in one day, on the day the scriptures call “the Day of the Lord” or just “the Day”. In the theories popular in our time, teachers split it all up into different parts and pieces---spread everything out over a series of years---they make it real complicated. Most of the things these modern teachers teach---especially the fantasy about the Rapture---come from the 1800s. The Bible (it’s a little older than the 1800s!) teaches that Christ will just have one Second Coming and He will accomplish all He wishes to accomplish on one day---on the Day of the Lord.

Let’s look at the 4 big things He will do.....

#1---Christ will defeat evil forever. The devil, the antichrist, the demons, wicked people----they all totally lose on that day. St. Paul makes this clear in I Thessalonians 1: 7-8 where he says that the Lord will “inflict vengeance on those....who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The Antichrist will be a very evil man totally serving Satan. He will take over----temporarily. And when the time is right in God’s eyes, Jesus will return on that Day and easily defeat him. St. Paul describes the conflict between Christ and Antichrist in II Thessalonians 2: 8----“Then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth.” Will the final battle be a long drawn out grueling affair with large armies marching against each other? No. Paul says Jesus will breath on Antichrist----and the war is over! That will be, in an instant, the final defeat of Antichrist, Lucifer, the demons, and those who follow the devil.

#2—On that same last day, the Lord, as He returns, will raise all the dead from their graves. The Apostle Paul describes this in I Corinthians 15:52---“For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable.” St. Gabriel will blow his horn and all who have fallen asleep in Christ over the centuries will rise up and be resurrected. And they will be transformed into glorious and exalted bodies and enter into a new and higher existence. Those who are alive on that day, who haven’t died? They will be instantly changed and elevated and will go from this life to the higher life without ever dying.

Perhaps you sometimes go to visit the graves of your loved ones----a very good thing to do. You pay your respects, you review some good memories, you say a prayer for their souls. But after Christ returns, that good custom won’t be possible anymore. Because there will no graves anymore to visit! They will all have been emptied out by Christ on that Day! No graves anymore because no death anymore. Even those who rejected God will be raised up by Christ--but to go to judgement, not glory.

#3---On that Day, Jesus Christ will judge all who have ever lived. All the billions of people! It’s going to be a big crowd standing before the Judgment Throne! We will learn our destination---heaven or hell. And who will be the judge sitting on the Judgement Throne? Jesus Himself. He Himself tells us this in John 5:27 where He says that the Father has given Him, the Son, “the authority to execute judgement because He is the Son of Man.” We will all be there to be judged by Jesus Himself.

So, we need to be sure to be ready for that day---that was the message of the parable in today’s gospel reading. We need in the here and now to be truly living for Christ so as to be ready for Judgment Day.

There was a school teacher who tried very hard to keep an extremely neat class room. And he very much wanted his little pupils to keep their desks and desk areas very neat as well. But there was one little girl named Mary who was notoriously messy and sloppy and didn’t do well at neatness. The teacher had to go on a big trip and would turn the class over to a substitute

teacher for a couple of months----but exactly when he would get back was unknown. On the last day before he left, he set up a contest for the students to encourage them to keep their desks neat when he was gone. He announced that whenever he returned he would do a desk inspection---and there would be prizes ----from first place down to third place---for those with the cleanest desks.

While he was on his trip, messy Mary told her friends she wanted to win first prize. The friends mocked her because of how messy she was. She said she had a plan, though---“I will make my desk perfectly clean every Monday.” The friends said, “That might work if the teacher comes back on a Monday. But what if it’s a Thursday?---your desk will be horrible by then.” Mary replied, “Well, then I will have to clean it every morning. That will work!” Her friends again disagreed with her---“Mary, that won’t work if he comes back in the afternoon. Your morning cleaning will be long over and your desk will be a mess again.” Mary thought a moment and then said, “Well, this is what I will do to win-----I’ll just have to keep my desk clean all the time!” (“Our Daily Bread”, 4/15/1997)

We need to “keep our desks clean” all the time, too. We need to live for God in such a way that we are always ready for when we hear the trumpets blowing in the sky! Ready for Judgement Day!

#4—On that same last Day, God will greatly change this old world. He will change it into a new and better world. The books of Revelation, II Peter, and Isaiah have a term they use for that new world---“the new heaven and the new earth”. No more sickness, or death, or sadness. No suffering, just eternal joy in God’s presence.

The Holy Apostle John, in the book of Revelation, had a vision of that new world in the form of a heavenly city. Hear how he describes the new heaven and the new earth in Revelation 21: 3-5a....”And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.’ Then He who sat on the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new’.”

Tears of sadness and suffering? Not in that new world, because God will wipe away our tears Himself! What a wonderful God we have!

The world itself will be transformed but we know very little about what that means. But as beautiful as our present world is, the new one will be even more beautiful. And our bodies will be better than now, too, because we will be in resurrected bodies. New bodies that will fit in well with a new world!

St. Gregory Palamas, our great Church Father from the late Middle Ages wrote about how

what happens to the world and to us will be similar-----“like our bodies and in a way similar to what will happen to us, the world will be changed by the power of the Holy Spirit being dissolved and transformed into something more divine.” St. Gregory doesn’t give us any details, because he didn’t know the details, just like we don’t!

But one day, that Day in the future when all these 4 things we have looked at take place, the Day when God changes everything-----then St. Gregory will know all about it, and so will we! And then we will live together in that new heaven and new earth in perfect joy forever.

What a day that will be! When? We don’t know and we can’t know. So don’t worry about that-----just always be ready because He is coming back.

Our Lord Jesus Christ never breaks a promise. When He was here the first time 2000 years ago He promised that He will come back-----He will! So until He comes back, whenever that may happen-----believe in Him, worship Him, obey Him, live for Him. And then you will be ready.

Maranatha....Come, Lord Jesus.