

ALL SAINTS' DAY - 1st November Responsibility: Canon Barlow

"I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them; 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.'" (Rev.21:3 & 4)

The Book of Revelation, the last in the Bible, is a strange piece of writing and not at all easy to follow. Its author, St. John - and there are arguments about just which St. John it is - has used many oblique references and metaphors which are now obscure, but which would have been perfectly clear to the people to whom it was written. Some people have selected out certain of the more horrific passages as dire warnings to those who do not follow their somewhat convoluted evangelistic beliefs - their tracts are sometimes put in our letterboxes and they must be taken with more than a pinch of salt! The great aim of this Book is to give reassurance of the joyful life of worship in heaven awaiting those who would follow Christ. We do not have to accept the details too literally. It speaks of a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations and tribes, people and language, giving worship and praise to Jesus the Lamb of God, now exalted in heaven.

Throughout the year the Church remembers and gives thanks for some of the great Christians whose lives have been devoted to God. Before the Reformation the Church in England, as in Christendom generally, had a great long catalogue of real and mythical saints, all requiring due respect and reverence to be paid. At the Reformation, the Church selected for special attention only those mentioned in Holy Scripture. These are called the "Red Letter" Saints Days. There is however a calendar of "Black Letter" Saints Days, which is a long list of Christian men and women whose lives have honoured Christ. This is to remind us almost daily that the work of the Holy Spirit in men and women crosses all barriers of time, geography, and race. When the Australian Prayer Book was prepared, a number of Australian holy people were included in its Calendar. William Grant Broughton, first bishop of Australia, for instance, and James Noble, the first indigenous Australian to be ordained. But in doing this it was not intended to suggest that this is all the holy people of God. We are not to forget those hidden but undoubted saints, who, since the days of the Apostles have served their Lord in this life and passed beyond it to be with Him in the next. All Saints' Day was set aside quite early in the Christian era as a day for commemorating and giving thanks for all those who loved and served the Lord in sincerity, and departed this life in the true faith of Christ.

Over the years the idea of a saint has changed from being "a member of the holy people" to being someone whose response to Christ's call was especially noteworthy. But in the New Testament the term "saints" means the whole body of professed believers. It means "the holy people of God." We are wrong if we limit the use of the word to those who are deemed to be the elite of the elect - the spiritual aristocracy of the Kingdom of God. At least six of St. Paul's letters are addressed to "the saints". For example take his letter to the Christians at Rome: "To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints." Or to the Ephesians: "To the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus." And yet as we read those letters addressed to saints we could be excused for thinking they were addressed to sinners! As

indeed they were. All Saints' Day is the festival of the faithful Christian. It sets before us the triumphs of ordinary believers, and assures us that in Christ each one of us can rise by His grace to higher things. As we think of that tremendous multitude whom no-one could number - each one having fought the good fight and conquered - we can find encouragement to struggle on, placing our trust in the same source of strength which they had.

This day tells us of the great possibilities of human life. We are assured that we can reach up to higher things and higher standards if we will only live in the strength and power of the Holy Spirit, constantly in touch with the Father through Jesus Christ. Yet even as we are encouraged, we are warned. While we admire the heroes of the past and are encouraged by the multitude, we are warned of the struggle and the strain and the suffering which may be the lot of a believer. But the victories of the multitude are rebukes to our faintheartedness, to our doubting, and to our pessimistic fears. We are assured that those things which are contrary to the will of God - the evil and vile things of this sinful world - can be overcome in the strength - which God supplies.

The saints were not born saints. They were men and women like ourselves. They had similar trials and temptations. Using the pictorial language of the Book of Revelation: "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." (Rev.7:14) But sorrow and trial and tribulation alone are not able to cleanse and purify our souls. We still need to plead the Cross and Passion of our Lord, and to rely on His saving grace. Redemption is not something we can achieve by effort or suffering in our own strength and determination. "By His death on the cross and rising to new life, He offered the one true sacrifice for sin and obtained an eternal deliverance for His people". as the Great Thanksgiving prayer in the new Prayer book expresses it. This is what that somewhat unpleasant phrase "washed in the blood of the Lamb" means - taking full advantage of what has been done for us, and on our behalf, while we were yet sinners.

The saints are not angels; they are not another order of beings different from ourselves. They are redeemed people, our comrades in Christ. We are one with them, joined in closest union by the bonds of faith and love. The Church is one. The saints are one, knit together in one holy fellowship. If we abide in Christ, nothing can part us from Him or from each other. "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord", wrote St. Paul in his Epistle to the Romans. (8:38,39)

The source of true saintliness is the Lord Himself. The love that makes a Christian holy is the love that looks out from self and depends utterly on the Person of the Redeemer. What is needed is the power to put the ideals of love and brotherhood into active and effective operation. So in the Collect for All Saints' Day we pray "give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that we may come to those inexpressible joys you have prepared for those who truly love you; through Jesus Christ our Saviour." **AMEN**

"The fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive." (vv.37,38)

A trick question was put to Jesus by some Sadducees, members of a sect of Judaism which did not believe in life after death. They brought up some ancient teaching of Moses which said that if a man and his wife had no children, and the man died, then it was his brother's responsibility to take the widow as his wife and have children in the name of his brother.[Incidentally, the General Synod amended the old Table of Kindred and Affinity in 1981, and it is now O.K. with the Anglican Church to do that. It was not on prior to that!

The Sadducees took the example to ridiculous lengths, saying what if there were seven brothers who in turn married that poor woman and died, all without producing an heir? Whose wife would she be in the resurrection? Once again Jesus refused to be drawn into pointless speculation, but turned the discussion into valuable teaching by showing that there is resurrection from physical death, but that the really important thing is how we live now. "He is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."

The Sadducees were trying to be smart. But we seriously want to know about life after death. Surely each of us has asked ourselves from time to time: "What's it all about?" Is life part of a plan, or just an accidental fusing and intermingling of molecules and atoms which happened to produce this universe and all life in it, including us? Can we make sense of it and feel that it is or will be worthwhile? Or must we just shrug our shoulders and carry on as best we can until the candle-flame of life is snuffed out? Many people do not think about it at all. They close their minds to it and think about something else more pleasant and straight-forward and self-indulgent and healthy.

There is implanted in the heart of every person the desire to make something of his or her life. And there is also a sense of sickening disappointment in a person's heart when he comes to see himself honestly, and admits that his life is in a mess. When we go on a journey we like to know where we are going, and if the going gets particularly rough, we want to know if it is at all worth while.

Those of us who are parents often wonder what lies ahead for our children, and how we might prepare them to meet and cope with things we are unable to foresee. If we ourselves have only the haziest notion of the purpose of life, and even suspect that the whole business of living might after all be without rhyme or reason, how can we possibly hope to guide our children to cope with whatever may befall them. How can we hope to influence our neighbours and community to a positive outlook on life? What's the point anyway?

Well firstly we must remember that our Christian Faith claims to enshrine a divine disclosure or revelation. It is God Himself who has revealed to us as much of His purpose as He wishes us to know and that we can understand. Even so, we often misunderstand His revelation, and distort it: we are frail earthen vessels - but it is God all the time who takes the initiative. The writer of the Epistle to the

Hebrews points out in his first verse that "God reveals Himself at sundry times and in divers manners." But our Faith teaches us that He has particularly done this using a certain race of people in history, through revelation and discipline, culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In the story which is unfolded in the Bible, God's purpose for the world takes on shape and pattern, which we can see for ourselves, and if we are wise, mould our lives according to the pattern. The Christian Faith does not result simply from an inspired guess or calculation by man reaching out after God, although this human element is never absent, but it results from God seeking man, entering into his life, and sending His Son - thus revealing His love.

The other point is this: in claiming to speak of God's purposes for mankind, our Faith does not claim to know all about God. We can only know His purposes as far as they relate to us, and we glimpse them only as far as He reveals them. There is mystery in the Being of God, and we must always approach Him in humility. Worship springs from wonder; **a God comprehended is no God at all.** As St. Paul says: "Now I know in part but then I shall know even as also I am known." (1 Cor.13:12)

The Presbyterian Church has a catechism (originally Anglican!) in which is asked: "What is the chief end of man?" And the answer is given: "To glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever." Our destiny is, through the grace of God and the response we make to it, to be raised to the "measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." Each one of us is created in the divine image, children of God. We are made capable of entering into fellowship with our Heavenly Father, and it is only as we accept that high privilege that we really become ourselves. The potentialities of our human nature are only fulfilled when we grow into Christ-likeness; when all our possibilities are developed - our capacity to love and worship; to relate to others in a creative interchange; to do good; to create that which has beauty; to discover that which is true.

So God's purpose is that in fellowship with Him we are to become all that we have within ourselves to be. To St. Paul for instance, this meant admitting Christ into his own heart, making Christ the centre of his life through an act of simple, though not easy, surrender. He did not mean by this simply following the example and teaching of Jesus as an inspired leader, who was dead and buried, but rather working with Him as One who is completely and vitally alive. So he could say: "I live, yet not I but Christ lives in me." (Gal.2:20) Being "in Christ" does not mean "pie in the sky bye and bye", but a life lived now of higher quality, more unselfish, more creative, more forgiving.

The Christian Faith teaches us that our final end is perfect fellowship with God, and perfect relationship within the family of the Church, the Body of Christ, with all those whose hope is in the Word made flesh, who came and dwelt among us. We might ask "When is this ultimate and supreme destiny to be achieved?" Here we have to look beyond death, to see death as the gateway to further life. It is here, in this world and in this life that the Christian is shaped and disciplined and prepared for that final blessedness which is in the life hereafter. There are strong arguments which might persuade a reasonable person that it is not unreasonable to suppose life goes on beyond death. The Christian's sure and certain hope however draws its support from a deep conviction of God's love as a Father, whose will it is that not one of His little ones should perish; and also from the historical fact of the Resurrection. St.-Paul, who was well able to talk philosophy when he wanted to, turned to Christ's Easter victory for the

assurance of the life to come - not to a theory or a learned discussion, *but* to a fact. "If Christ be not risen from the dead, then we are of all men most miserable." (1 Cor.15:10) Christ is the very life of the believer, and as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive: the reward of the humble follower of Jesus is to be with Him.

God's good purpose for man is that he shall live in fellowship with his Creator. St. Augustine summed it up very neatly, by saying: "Thou hast created us for Thyself, and our heart finds no rest until it rests in Thee."° Not to worry about the details - trust in God and live accordingly.

AMEN

14th November 2010 – Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost Year C

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

[Based on the Gospel for today viz. Luke 21:5-19]

Jesus said: "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them. When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." (Luke 21: 8 & 9)

In summary, our Lord's teaching in the Gospel reading for this Sunday is that His disciples should not rely overmuch on either signs of permanence or signs of destruction.

The magnificent Temple in Jerusalem being built by King Herod the Great looked as if it would last for ever, the stone building blocks were so huge. Yet Jesus foretold that very soon it would be completely destroyed and razed to the ground. Most of it had been constructed between 19 and 9 B.C., and work continued on it until A.D. 64. This was the Temple where at 12 years of age, Jesus stayed talking with the learned teachers instead of going home with His parents. Here, later, He threw out the traders and money changers, and so gave notice of His divine calling. As a faithful member of Judaism, He returned on a number of occasions to worship with His disciples at the great Festivals. During Holy Week, before His arrest, He taught there.

This Temple was destroyed by the Romans in A.D.70, following a Jewish uprising against their overlords. It was never rebuilt. Only a small length of walling remains, and this is known as the Wailing Wall, where Orthodox Jews still mourn the destruction of their holiest place. It has been occupied since the 7th century by a great Moslem shrine, the Dome of the Rock, from where Muslims believe, their great prophet Mohammed was taken up into heaven. The site has always been important to the Jews. It is alleged to be the place where Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac. King David bought the site for the Temple he planned to erect, but it was his son Solomon who built the first Temple, around 950 B.C. This building was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in 587 B.C., when Judah was conquered and most of the people were taken into exile in Babylon. In 515 B.C. under Haggai and Zechariah the returned exiles rebuilt the Temple - now known as the Second Temple, and this lasted until another destruction in 167 B.C. Herod the Great erected the grandest Temple of the three, his chief motive being a bid to gain popular approval: politicians did that sort of thing even in those days!

I have given you a run-down on the history of the Temple, so that you may have a deeper appreciation of the emotional feeling which the Jews had for their chief place of worship. You can imagine the reaction when Jesus said: "The days will come when there shall not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." (v.6)

These words were spoken by Jesus to His friends on the Tuesday prior to Good Friday. He could see what was going to happen. The Jews had never accepted the Romans as their governors, and there were frequent outbursts of fighting and uprising. You remember that Barabbas who was released rather than Jesus, was the leader of an insurgent group. He had been imprisoned for insurrection and murder. As Jesus looked at the signs of the times, everything pointed to the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. It would be a natural judgement upon the Jewish people, and it occurred in A.D.70, after a desperate siege.

There is that other grief-filled prophecy by Jesus earlier on: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say: 'Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" (Luke 13:34,35) They had their chances; they rejected them; disaster followed as it inevitably does when people, now as then, turn away and reject God. It is not that God is being vindictive either, although sometimes the writers of the Scriptures seem to see it that way. It is a natural progression. Things always go better when you follow the maker's instructions. And they will usually come unstuck if you think you can operate without referring to the handbook. Sometimes you can go wrong even with the handbook! Don't be surprised if now and then you need a hand in interpreting our Creator's handbook to see how the directions have to be applied in your own particular situation.

That leads us to the other aspect of Jesus' teaching today. There are people who misread the handbook, or who only read the bits that appeal to them. Jesus said: "Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming 'I am he,' and 'The time is near.'" People do come to our doors with gloomy forebodings that the world is about to end because, well just look at all the earthquakes and wars and terrible things going on. Is it so different now from almost any other time in history? Modern media can put disasters before us in a way never before possible. Read any historical novel to get a glimpse of the shocking conditions and vice which humanity endured in other times.

Jesus was saying to His followers then, and to us now, that Christians are not to be prophets of doom. That same passage warns against seeing every earthquake, famine, political upheaval, or cosmic sign as an immediate indication that the final Day of Judgement has arrived. On the contrary, Jesus encourages His disciples not to be led astray by such events, nor by false teachers who misuse such events. Rather, such times are to be opportunities for Christian testimony. Patient endurance and courage will demonstrate God's care and support for His people, rather than rushing off after prophets of destruction. The way ahead may be full of pitfalls and dangers and suffering. The Christian cannot expect an armchair ride to heaven; he has no right to expect that everything will be sweetness and light in a fallen disobedient world. Jesus Himself had to go through His time of grief and pain and anguish - why should it be any different for us? All we can be sure of is that God will eventually bring good out of evil so that right will triumph in the end. We are called to faithful testimony and endurance, as Christ's followers over the last 2000 years have been. A healthy disrespect for putting too much belief in so-called permanent institutions and for putting too much emphasis on the spiritual and moral failures of society will enable us to steer a path of courageous testimony for God and His loving concern for His creation.

It seems a paradox that the Church at this time of the year leading up to the celebration of the Incarnation frequently warns that "The time is near" - seemingly going against Jesus' warning! The Church does this because Jesus did promise that one day He will come again in judgement, and we must be ready for it. But unlike the prophets of doom, this is an encouragement to be ready to be able to provide an account of the worthiness of our lives. We have been called into service and we should be prepared to give an account any time we are called upon to do so.

Worship helps us to remain in a state of readiness for the coming of the Lord. That might not be for us at the end of the world - it is more likely to be at the time when we leave this life. Then it will not matter what other people thought of us, and even less what we thought of ourselves. All that will matter then is what our Lord's opinion of us is.

People cannot build a society that will last for ever; neither can they totally destroy a creation whose beginning and end has always been in the hand of God. We might mess it up and spoil what is meant to be lovely and fruitful - but it is still God's and still in His care.

Our task is to live as God's people in this world - by our actions and our words daily bearing testimony to Him. "By your endurance you will gain your souls."

AMEN

LAST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST: CHRIST THE KING, Year C – 21st November 2010

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

At first glance it seems peculiar that on this last Sunday of the Church Year our thoughts are thrown by the Gospel right back to Good Friday. But in fact the theme of this day is one of triumph as we conclude our annual round of festival and-fast, and consideration of the earthly life of Jesus and of His teachings which are to lead us from earth to heaven. We acknowledge Jesus today not only as Saviour and Redeemer, but also as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

It is interesting, and important, to note that Jesus never claimed kingship for Himself, although there is a thread running through the Gospels building up to His acceptance of that, particularly in the final chapters. His kingship, as He Himself said, is very different from that of earthly rulers. The first king of the Jews was Saul, anointed by the prophet Samuel about 1200 years before the birth of Jesus. Until then the Jewish tribes were a loose federation ruled by men - and women - known as the Judges. But as the Israelites came into their Promised Land and were faced by, naturally, hostile people like the Philistines, they felt the need for one leader with overall authority. Samuel at first resisted the pressure to select a king for them. In chapter 8 of the First Book of Samuel, he warns them: "He will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots and to make his implements of war ,... He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants." Cronyism, even in this days! He goes on: "In that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourself, but the Lord will not answer you in that day." But the people refused to listen to the warnings of Samuel, and they said: "No! but we will have a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations."

It turned out disastrously, and much as Samuel had expected. Then David was made king. It was a golden age for a time, and many later writings hark back to the idealized period. But his son, Solomon turned out to be such a tyrant that ten of the twelve tribes couldn't tolerate it and eventually revolted, dividing the kingdom into two, Israel and Judah, and so it went on. There were defeats and disasters and exiles, until it was almost a relief when the Romans under Pompey conquered the country in BC 63, and enforced peace. Yet the Jews still looked back to the Golden Age of David, and yearned for a king who would put things right and restore them to their proper status as a world power. When He did eventually appear, few people recognised Him, because the kingship of Jesus was not what most people were looking for and expecting.

In the Old Testament there is no commoner title for God than "King". The Psalmist wrote: "The Lord is King for ever and ever. ° (10:18). And: "He is the King of glory." (-24:7-10) "He is the King of all the earth." (47:7). "The Holy One of Israel is our King" comes very near to being a one-sentence statement of the faith of Israel. (89:18) The phrase "My King and my God" is the instinctive language of love and devotion. (84:3)

Jesus came into this world to be the complete revelation of God to mankind. And in the New Testament record Jesus is set forth as King a number of times, although the full recognition does not

come until the closing chapters. The message to Mary at the Annunciation was "The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of His Kingdom there will be no end:" (Luke 1:32) The Magi come with the question: "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?" (Matt.2:2) Much of Jesus' teaching was about the Kingdom of God. Many parables begin: "The Kingdom of God is like "

But it is at the end of the story that again and again Jesus is presented as King. When He entered Jerusalem for the last time, many saw in that entry the fulfillment of the ancient prophecy of Zechariah: "Behold, your king comes unto you: triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass." (Zech.9:9) The crowds greeted Him: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." It was on the charge that He claimed to be king that the Jewish leaders brought Jesus to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor: "We found this man perverting our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a king." (Luke 23:2) Pilate's first question to Jesus was: "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus answered him: "You have said so." The implication is that the man giving the reply will not deny it, but that He Himself might have expressed the situation differently, or would have placed a different interpretation on its meaning. It is as if Jesus said that while it was verbally correct, neither Pilate nor the Jews had even begun to understand what that kingship meant. "My kingdom is not of this world." (John 18:36)

It is extraordinary how the king motif runs through the last hours of Jesus. The soldiers mocked Him and parodied His Kingship, dressing Him up in an old robe and crying: "Hail, king of the Jews!" The placard attached to the cross, written in three languages, said: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." It was by this title that Pilate, obviously fed up with the skulduggery of the chief priests, mockingly presented Jesus to them, saying "Here is your king; shall I crucify your king?" It was as a broken and discredited king that the mob jeered at Him: "He is the King of the Jews", they said, "Let Him come down from the cross and we will believe in Him." (Matt.27:42)

But if the title of King was used mockingly by the crowd, there were those for whom it was a confession of faith. Nathanael, for all his unwillingness to believe, was compelled to say when confronted by Jesus: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (John 1:49) When His ministry was reaching its climax, James and John came with the request that they might occupy the chief places when He came into His Kingdom. (Matt.20:21) And there was the penitent criminal we heard about in the Gospel reading, crucified alongside Jesus, who cried: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Later on the writer of the Book of Revelation proclaimed Jesus as "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" and depicted Him ruling in glory. It is not the Kingship of Jesus which causes puzzlement today, in the way it did to Pilate. It is the nature of that Kingship, and Jesus' manner of exercising it which many people today just cannot grasp and accept. And at times even Christians exhibit this lack of understanding as they demand why, if Jesus is Lord and King of creation, He does not rid the world of pain, suffering, war, injustice. "If He is the King, let Him come down from the cross and we will believe in Him" is still the cry today. "If Christ really has the power of a universal king, then let Him create a better world for us, and then we will believe in Him," people say, in effect. In the 11 verses of the Gospel for

today there are five different attitudes displayed towards Christ and His Kingship, and all are displayed by men and women today, as then. But only one of the five is right and helpful.

The first attitude is that of the ordinary bystanders: they just watched, wanting to remain uncommitted, as so many do today. The intellectual leaders of the day dismissed the whole affair in one clever phrase: "He saved others, let Him save Himself, if He is the Christ of God, His chosen One." And they turned away to other things, as if the whole business was solved. The soldiers mocked and jeered and abused, and that's a common enough response today if the Church makes critical comment about morals and lifestyles - and the G.S.T., and boat-people, and sexuality.

The first criminal bitterly rejected Jesus, as many do if the Church, or God, doesn't arrange things to suit them. Only the second criminal displayed the proper attitude as he recognised both the sinlessness of Jesus and his own sinfulness, and turned to Him in prayer and faith: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Christ's reign is one of forgiveness and love, not one of miraculous or magical power. It was, and is, the one aim of Jesus to persuade men and women to respond to the love of God, and when we enthrone Him in our hearts and acknowledge Him to be the Lord, we know ourselves to be His subjects. Today we honour Christ as King - a King who humbled Himself completely in order to raise us up to the full status of children of God, our heavenly Father.

The Lord is King for ever and ever: thanks be to God.

AMEN

Based on the Gospel for today: Matthew 24: 36-44.

The story of Noah and the great flood referred to by Jesus in today's Gospel is the Old Testament Reading for the Second Sunday after Pentecost, later in the year. And as we hear it only once in the 3-year Liturgical Cycle, I suggest that you read it for yourself, perhaps later today, in chapters 6,7, and 8 of the Book Genesis, to refresh your memories of the details. This story is an important parable, used by our Lord to illustrate certain aspects of His teaching, as we heard a few minutes ago.

Once upon a time, when people's knowledge was limited to their immediate surroundings, it may have been possible to imagine seven pairs of all so-called clean animals, and one pair of so-called unclean animals, plus seven pairs of every kind of bird, being housed on one boat. Modern knowledge about the vast variety of living creatures of our world surely tells us that such a thing is just not possible. So today, if any thought is given to the story of Noah and his family and their obedience to God, it is probably written off as just a fable, and one more proof that the Bible is irrelevant for normal sensible people.

The point made by Jesus was that the Flood and the ark is a picture of the unexpectedness of the Day of Judgement and the offer of salvation to those who are faithful to God. That message is as true today as it was in the time of Noah - people live and behave without any thought of the impending judgement of God. The hour of Christ's coming again is known to God and to God alone. The Last Days will come with shattering suddenness on those who are preoccupied with the concerns of this material life. The coming of Christ in glory to judge the living and the dead and to take full control of His rebellious Kingdom will be a time of separation and of judgement, as He gathers to Himself those who are faithful.

Perhaps the Church has talked too much of this Day of Judgement as if it will be some far-off day, and because "tomorrow never comes", we tend to put off worrying about it. Because we do not like the thought of dying, we also tend to put thoughts of death off too, and so may be caught unprepared - not only with our financial affairs in a mess - debts outstanding, no Will made - but spiritually unprepared also. The notices in the "Deaths" column in "The Advertiser" which say "Suddenly taken from us" and "We had no time to say Goodbye" might make us wonder about the spiritual preparedness of the deceased. For at the moment of our death we leave the time-scale of this life to enter the timelessness of eternity, and face judgement.

This is a disturbing subject, and not too popular. Indeed it is so disturbing that many refuse to believe that it really exists, or that it could ever happen to them. We prefer a settled, ordered existence, where everything is predictable and familiar. As in the time of Noah - eating and drinking, marrying and being married. So, said Jesus, did the people of the days before the Flood. And yet one day the Flood did come and swept them all away. This story is a warning that we are never to become so immersed in our

present time that we forget eternity. Never to let our concern with worldly affairs, however necessary, completely distract us from remembering that there is a God; that the issues of life and death are in His hands; that whenever His call comes, it must find us ready.

In the Middle Ages, Noah's Flood was a familiar and popular story, often staged in the Market Place as a play, posing no difficulties at all. Perhaps it was because they lived in an age when life was cheap, and war and famine and plague took regular toll. But we live in an age of plentiful and horrific disasters too, both natural and man-made, and we never get used to them. Which is just as well in one sense because that stops us from taking them for granted, and countries rush aid, and strive to make treaties to alleviate the distress and suffering.

In Victorian times the linking of the celebration of Christ's First Coming as the Babe of Bethlehem with His Second Coming as King was a very necessary corrective to the sugary sentimentality which had come to surround the commemoration of the Saviour's birth with pretty Christmas cards and brightly decorated Christmas trees loaded with presents. (It was in Queen Victoria's reign that trees and cards were introduced!)

Our own day has to take the blame for introducing jolly old Father Christmas. Apparently, Coca Cola claims that honour. Santa Claus is caricature of St. Nicholas who gave presents to needy people and little children, just as the Wise Men did for the Infant Christ. We hear a great deal about the possibility, and even probability of Doomsday resulting from nuclear warfare. It is not uncommon to find young people questioning the moral rightness of bringing children into a world over which hangs the threat of doom. Yet neither the birth of the Saviour nor His promised Second Coming impress or have relevance for the average semi-pagan citizen.

Christians must not let themselves become infected or distracted by either the sentimental unreal approach to the celebration of Christmas, nor by the gloom and doom fear that the end of the world is nigh. The Christian stands firmly upon the joyful confidence created by a proper understanding of the promise of both the First and the Second Comings of Christ. "For God sent the Son into the world - not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him." Thus St. John sums up the reason lying behind the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. For those of us who seek salvation and eternal life that is fantastically good news. That is the reason for celebration at Christmas-tide. And all the partying, all the present giving, all the conviviality associated with this time of the year is hollow and empty unless we are in fact celebrating the coming into the world of the Saviour of mankind.

With that understanding and belief, we need not fear the Second Coming, the Day of the Lord, the Judgement Day - whether that occasion be at our own death, or some nuclear holocaust, or the promised end of the ages. It means that we need not be filled with fear or despair. We can lift up our heads in joyful expectation as we know that the time of our redemption is drawing near. Traditionally Advent has been kept by the Church as a penitential, sombre, gloomy Season - a sort of little Lent, lacking that joyful expectation which the anticipation of redemption and salvation ought to be giving. But didn't Jesus Himself encourage joyful expectation? St. Luke reports Him saying: "Now when these things begin to take place - that is, the signs of the end of time - look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (21:28)

The only ones who need to fear and tremble are those who live like the people in the time of Noah, blissfully ignoring the warnings, and living selfish, self-centred lives, until the flood came and swept them away. We who seek to serve the Lord, to worship Him, and to do His will have nothing to fear. So we are free to celebrate both the First and the Second Coming of the Saviour with joyous anticipation. **Amen**