

The Day of the Lord

In the name of the Church's soon returning Bridegroom, dear friends in Christ: In the sermon message last week for the Feast of All Saints I mentioned how that I sometimes encounter Christians who harbor a deep dread of the second coming of our Lord Jesus. They imagine that on that day they will be required to stand before the Lord in judgment, and that all their secret sins and hidden vices will be put on display and shown to the assembled court as if on some kind of three-dimensional video. They picture themselves standing there in wretched shame while every ugly truth is revealed. Only after it's all over and all the charges are read will they be given the opportunity to enter a plea – at which time they'll be allowed to confess their faith in Jesus and then be forgiven and exonerated. So yes, they think, at the end of the day I'll get to go to heaven; but only after first being thoroughly humiliated – and then, after that, every time I run into somebody in heaven they'll be thinking, "Ah yes, I remember you. You're the one who did all that *really* embarrassing stuff."

Anyway, for the benefit those who are concerned about such a possibility, I went on to explain that a faithful Christian has no need to worry. Jesus said that those who hear his Word and believe the testimony of the Father who sent him to be the Savior – he said that those people have *already* crossed over from death to life and have passed completely out judgment. Their sins, having been nailed to the cross with Jesus when he suffered for our sakes, are essentially erased from the memory of God. They're gone. They can't be brought up ever again. So, for the faithful Christian, there will be nothing to fear on the great and terrible Day of the Lord. We can be absolutely confident of that ... and yet ... and yet we want to be careful not to have a misplaced *overconfidence*. This is a problem that surfaces in two of today's Scripture readings, and so we would do well to sit up, take notice, and heed the warning that these lessons present us.

Of the two texts in question, we're probably most familiar with the Parable of the Ten Virgins that we heard as today's Gospel. Without going into all of the details, the meaning of the parable is plain enough: there are some people who are waiting for the return of the Bridegroom – that is, Christ – who won't be ready when he comes. And it's important that we see this. These are not people who are obviously outside the Church: unbelievers, pagans and so on. No, these are people who, along with the others, are eagerly anticipating the coming of the Lord. They *think* they'll be going into the wedding feast along with everyone else. The problem is that their preparations have been inadequate. When the Bridegroom comes, they wake to discover that they haven't got any oil to keep their lamps of true faith burning. And no one who does have it can give it to them. That is to say, you can't believe for someone else. And the means that create faith and cause it to grow, the Word and Sacraments, you can't receive them for anyone else. They've got to get it for themselves. But by the time the foolish ones figure it out, their efforts are too little, too late. They stand at the door begging for admittance only to hear Jesus speak the dreadful words, "I honestly don't know who you are."

The question we need to ask, of course, is just exactly who are these people who think they are prepared to meet the Lord and aren't? And since they are clearly self-deceived, how can we be sure that we are not among them? That question ought to sober all of us. I mean, if they don't know that they're unprepared, how can you be sure that you are? What's the status of your oil supply? And how can you tell?

Unfortunately, the Parable of the Ten Virgins is a little short on specifics. But recognizing that the Holy Scripture has only one Author, we can find some of the answers we're looking for by going to today's Old Testament lesson from the book of the prophet Amos. There Amos is confronting a similar situation: people who are eagerly waiting for the coming of the Day of the Lord and thinking that it's going to be a grand and glorious thing for them; but who are dead wrong about it.

The prophet asks them, "Why are *you* hoping for the Day of the Lord? It's going to be gloom and darkness for you, not light. And just when you think you've escaped from one disaster, another will overtake you." He gives the example of a man who runs away from a lion only to be caught and mauled by a bear, and of another fellow who seems to have gotten away from the bear too. He gets into his house, bolts the door behind him, and leans on the wall to catch his breath—and that's when a cobra strikes him. The point is that when the Day of the Lord comes there will be no escaping God's judgment.

But to understand what Amos is saying, it's necessary to know to whom it is that he's speaking. The prophet lived during the time of the divided kingdom. You may remember that after King Solomon completed his rule over all Israel, his son, who wasn't quite as wise as his father, managed to really bungle things. Whereas Solomon's rule was seen as the glorious golden age of Israel, his son seemed to want to usher in an age of oppression. The ten northern tribes of Israel told him to forget it. They broke away from him and united to form their own nation under their own king with their capital in Samaria. That left the land of Judah in the south along with Simeon and a part of Benjamin, which later became collectively known simply as Judah, with its capital of Jerusalem.

At first it seemed to work out pretty well, this northern alliance of tribes; but there were two fairly serious problems. The first had to do with worship. The only authorized place to do that, namely to offer sacrifices and celebrate the major festivals like Passover and The Day of Atonement, and so on, well, that was in Jerusalem. That's where the Temple was. That's where the Ark of the Covenant was. So, in a very real sense, that's where *God* was – at least that's where he made his presence known and where he wanted to be worshipped. But the king of the northern tribes feared that if all his people kept going back to Jerusalem to worship – if that's where their hearts were spiritually – it would only be a matter of time before they switched their political allegiance back there as well. So, to prevent that from happening, he decided to set up a couple of alternate worship sites up in the northern kingdom. He told his people, "You don't have to go back to Jerusalem to worship. We have our own places right here. They're closer and more convenient." And then, to really clinch the deal, he made worship up there more *fun*. They mixed in a few sensual pagan elements, got rid of a lot of that depressing talk about sin, bent a few of the commandments to make them easier to live with, and added a few special holidays to spice things up. And for the most part, the people fell for it – or rather, fell into it, for it was surely a trap of devil. But let me say this: they only fell for it because they wanted to. Worship that's easy, fun, not so depressing? A God who isn't so demanding and who's a lot softer on how people behave? Who doesn't want that?

But like I said, there was another problem; and it had to do with the Messianic Promises. You see, everyone knew that a lot of prophecies about the Messiah said that when he came, he would be a king in the house and line of David. And the kings in that line were ruling in the southern Kingdom of Judah, not up in here the north. So, there was certain feeling of ... I think you might say *illegitimacy* about what we were doing up here in a political sense. The way they solved that problem was to reinterpret what the Day of the

Lord was going to be. What they said was this: “Yes, we know that the Messiah will come from the line of David; but when he appears, we’ll know it. And at that point the ten northern tribes will reunite with our brothers in the south and we’ll be one big happy family again. But until that Day of the Lord comes, we’ll stay separated and just keep on doing what we’re doing.”

All right, you need to know that all of this concerning the division of the kingdoms happened about one hundred and fifty years before Amos began his ministry. And so, for that amount of time, for at least a century and a half, the northern Kingdom of Israel had been independent of the south and pursuing their own aberrant religious trajectory. And what had started off by being a little more lax and unscriptural had only gotten worse. Much worse. You know how it is: the scandals the parents come to accept or at least don’t condemn as forcefully as they ought, they become the rule and norm for their children. And after a few generations of such Scripture twisting and watering down, and the moral and ethical degeneration that goes with it, there isn’t much left. So, in a spiritual sense, the northern kingdom was a cesspool. Ah, but don’t think the people weren’t religious; they were *very* religious. They worshipped, and sang hymns, and offered sacrifices; they had their special feast days – but none of it had anything to do with the Lord, or what he had actually revealed about himself, or the way he wanted to be worshipped. And that’s why we hear him saying through the prophet, “I hate your feasts and your worship services! I won’t even look at your sacrifices! Take away that noise you call singing. I’m not listening!”

Of course, that’s not what the people thought. They were very sincere about all that they were doing with respect to worship. They were just sincerely wrong about it. And they had what they thought was reason to believe that what they were doing was perfectly acceptable. They seemed to have the Lord’s blessing: the economy was booming. Wealth was pouring into the nation. And the broader international situation was very encouraging: their enemies were weak and disorganized. It seemed to them that the Lord was smiling upon them and that a new golden age was just about to dawn – which made them think that the Day of the Lord was about to arrive. Things were so good they figured it could only mean that the Messiah was about to come and establish his kingdom – and then things would be even better.

And that’s why the Lord sent Amos to them. It was his job to adjust their thinking. “Yes”, he said, “You’re absolutely right. The Day of the Lord is about to come upon you; but it isn’t going to be at all what you’re expecting. It will be for you a day of judgment and you will not escape.”

I would love to report that his message was well received, and that the people of the northern kingdom repented and turned back to the Lord with all their hearts—but that isn’t what happened. Instead, the religious leaders said to Amos, “How dare you come up here and speak to us this way! What gives you the right criticize us? You’re hateful, you’re mean, you’re narrow-minded. You’re stuck in the past. Go away and leave us alone. You’re only going to get people upset with all your negative talk.” And so they did not repent. Not long afterward the Lord raised up a powerful enemy nation to execute his judgment. They came in and quite literally wiped the kingdom of the ten northern tribes off the map. It was *their* Day of the Lord. Those who weren’t killed in the conquest were sold into slavery and scattered across the empire. They ceased to exist as a people and a nation.

But where does that leave us? Hopefully you were able to detect in the description of the northern kingdom's religious life many close parallels to the state of much of the Christian Church today. The simple fact is that in the vast majority of churches in our country, the Bible is not taken as the authoritative and infallible Word of God. Most of the stories are considered little more than myths and fables. Many church bodies seem to be in a race to see which can most quickly discard and abandon the fundamental doctrines of the faith. You name it: Creation, the Triune nature of the Godhead, God's knowledge of all things, the virgin birth of Jesus, his being both God and man, his resurrection from the dead – all of these are being openly denied by professing Christians and taught against by supposedly faithful pastors. Just this last week I read an article about how most progressive theologians have long since given up the idea of the death of Jesus being a sacrifice of atonement for sin. They're saying that's nothing more than divine child abuse. No wonder there's so much violence in the world, they say, if that's what we have as an example. What we need to do is reinterpret the faith. We need a kinder, gentler understanding of God if we are to be kinder and gentler ourselves.

Then there's the way the Church worships. There's no other way to say this: a lot of what passes for Christian worship today, isn't. Not even remotely. You have only to examine the lyrics of most contemporary praise songs. You find out that while they mention God and Jesus quite often, they really aren't about them at all. They aren't about what God has done for us in Jesus his Son. They are instead about the worshippers themselves: how devoted they are, and how much they love the Lord. And every decade or so along comes some new experts who tell us that we have to reinvent the Church. It has to be more dynamic, more relevant. They always say if the Church doesn't change, it's going to die. Listen: the truth is that the death of the Church happens precisely when it does change. It dies when the focus is taken off the basics of man's sin and God's grace in sending his Son to die for sinners.

But, of course, sin itself is being taken out of the discussion in most churches. More than half of professing Christians in our country today don't see any problem at all with murdering unborn infants. It's a personal choice, they say. And so are a lot of other things that the Lord specifically prohibits and condemns in the Scriptures. Sometimes it seems the only sin that remains is the sin of being critical of the personal choices that someone else makes. That, to many, is the only thing that's really unacceptable.

And here's the thing: we see these things happening around us all the time. We would be foolish to think that it can't happen – indeed, that it isn't happening – to us. All of us have a tendency to want to compromise, to not be confrontational, to want to water down the Law's demands, to let the "little things" slip by, to not argue about doctrine, and to just kind of relax and go with the flow. But there's a reason we call the Church in this world the Church militant. We're in a fight: a fight to preserve the truth of God. And if you're not engaged in the fight then whether you mean to or not, you are helping to lose it.

The message of the prophet Amos is today more timely than ever. Through him the Lord is calling us to wake up and repent of our own spiritual lethargy and complacency. He's calling us to true worship that focuses on Christ and his saving work on our behalf. He's warning us to ensure that we are properly prepared for the Day of the Lord so that it will be for us a day of glory and not of judgment. May the Lord in his mercy give us the grace and wisdom to heed this call so that we remain prepared at all times. And may he give us the boldness and courage of the prophet to extend his message to others that they too may be delivered on the Day of the Lord. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!