

1st Sunday of ADVENT
(Isa 2:2-4; Rom 13:11-14; Matt 24:37-44)

Our violet vestments tell us that Advent is here; that means, soon, Christmas and the birth of the tiny infant Jesus. By contrast, last Sunday we celebrated the Solemnity of Christ the Universal King.

It is not surprising that the gospels of the last Sundays of the liturgical year speak of the final judgment and the end of the world, as they do, but this first Sunday of Advent, also, carries forward the same theme and the need for watchfulness. This is because this season prepares for two Advents, one when Jesus first entered the world, born in the flesh of the Virgin Mary, the other when He returns to take His glorious throne as King of the Universe.

As Christians, that second coming is something to look forward to, something we should anticipate with longing. I remember a conference in which Fr. Thomas Verner Moore, our venerable founder, said: "The monk should look to the east each morning and wonder whether the Lord will come today." Not all our sources encourage us to anticipate. Even today's gospel speaks of days of Noah, when for everyone it was "business as usual" until "the flood came and carried them all away." And then there is that mysterious saying about, "Two men out in the field, two women grinding at the mill" (and Luke adds "two people in one bed"), "one will be taken, the other left." And then there are those parables of those who come to the banquet too late and hear those fearful words, "Depart from

me; I never knew you." But these are all part of Our Lord's exhortation to be watchful. The foolish bridesmaids had fallen asleep, the manager whose lord finds him drunk didn't know "the day or the hour," as also the man who allows the thief to break in and steal. So, many of Our Lord's parables are about watchfulness. Today St. Paul exhorts us; he explains simply, "it is the hour for you to wake from sleep." But this is a joyful announcement, "the day is at hand," that is, the day we have been awaiting. But it is joyful only for those who are prepared. Therefore: "throw off the works of darkness, put on the armor of light."

There are some Christian fundamentalists who delight in emphasizing the dark, violent scenes we find in apocalyptic literature, Armageddon and all that. Their predilection is demonstrated in the popularity of such works as "The Late Great Planet Earth," from a good many years ago, and, more recently, the "Left Behind" series. They glory in the expectation of the "Rapture," when all "real Christians" will be taken up to heaven and all the rest of us will be "left behind" to endure terrible plagues. The bumper ticker that said, "In case of Rapture this car will be unmanned" told me two things about the lady driving it: She numbered herself among the "real Christians" who would be "raptured out," and she didn't know the first definition of "unmanned."

That Rapture idea is totally unbiblical. It comes partly from today's gospel which says "one will be taken and the other left"; however, Jesus simply refers to

separation of the good from the bad at judgment. A little closer to their scenario is when St. Paul speaks about meeting Christ in the clouds--both the dead who now will rise, and the good who are alive and so do not have to rise. As Christ returns, all these meet Him in the clouds as a welcoming committee to bring Him to earth. So their artistic depictions of "real Christians" shooting to heaven through the clouds like miniature ICBMs are not even true to St. Paul!

It doesn't speak well for the Christian spirit of those who rejoice at the thought of people (OTHER people, those who aren't "real Christians") undergoing the terrible suffering of Armageddon at the end time. Esp. since that is not the only way of conceiving the end time.

Today's first reading is a case in point. Isaiah's beautiful picture of beating swords into plowshares, nation no longer raising the sword against nation. All this comes about because people will turn to the Lord for instruction, learn to walk in His ways. These are end-time people; there is no flaming Armageddon for people who live this way. And there are many similar pictures. Isaiah, in very idealistic imagery speaks of peace in the animal kingdom: "The wolf shall be a guest of the lamb ..., the calf and the young lion shall browse together." Or, most beautiful of all, the Lord foretells that all peoples, even those previously inveterate enemies, now become one people: "On that day Israel shall be a third party with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, when the Lord of hosts gives this blessing: 'blessed be my people Egypt, and the

work of my hands Assyria, my heritage, Israel." And what will Israel's king be like in those days? No longer warlike: "He shall banish the chariot from Ephraim,/ and the horse from Jerusalem;/ The warrior's bow shall be banished,/ and he shall proclaim peace to the nations" (Zech 9:10).

Therefore, two very different pictures of the end time: which shall it be? Realistically, it can be said: it is your choice. Remember, these are images; the realities we are in charge of. Use of the stores of nuclear arms now on hold could bring about a pretty good approximation of Armageddon. Isaiah's picture of peace is harder, because it involves the good faith of all people, not just the power of a few madmen. In the large picture we can encourage our policy makers toward peace and disarmament. "if you want peace, work for justice." Justice would be food for the starving people in Africa and Asia (cf. the exhortations of Pope Francis; the money we would save on disarmament would more than cover this. On the personal level, it would be being neighbors to our neighbors. Create a world in which there are no squabbles and you will have the opposite of Armageddon. The whole spirit of Christmas urges us in this direction. Let us spend our Advent fostering this spirit of Christmas. Do not let the present shape of the world discourage you--Israel, Syria, Iran, etc. Remember the saying, "The Lord is not through with me yet." Neither is He through with our world. The universe is still evolving--spreading out at almost the speed of light, old stars dying, new stars being born. So also is God's history with us still in progress. We can help it on its way, especially by

promoting peace in our communities, true love for all.