

A Sermon preached by The Most Revd Dr. Scott McLaughlin for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, December 21, AD 2003

This is the fourth Sunday in Advent. During the Advent season we have considered the return of our Lord: his Second Advent, when he comes in glory as our Judge. Today we also begin to look toward the celebration of Christmas, when we commemorate—when we “remember together”— the first Advent of Christ.

Perhaps the greatest news story in history with the largest headline ever printed in your morning paper, would be only two words long: “Christ Returns”. It would surely be greatest event in modern times. “Christ Returns” would be a headline that many would meet with joy, and many meet with dread.

The same could be said of Christ’s first Advent. The angels announced, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will towards men.” But Christ’s birth wasn’t a joyful thing for some in the first century. King Herod, for instance, who used the power of the government in an attempt to murder the Christ child, didn’t want to hear the joyful message. It wasn’t good news to the priestly cast serving at the Temple, because the Advent of the Messiah heralded the end of Judaism. It wasn’t good news for the Sadducees, the wealthy elite of Jerusalem, who had compromised themselves with their Roman overlords. It wasn’t a joyful thing to the Pharisees, who had so changed the ancient faith of Israel as to create a new, legalistic religion.

It is the time today to consider if Christ’s Second Advent will be good news, joyful news, to you. Do you know the Jesus of the First Advent, and do you have a relationship with Him that has prepared you for the Day of Judgment? It is worth the time to consider what Christ’s First Advent really means to you, to all Christians, to our culture, and the world.

Ask yourself the question, “What if Christ had never come”? What if there had been no such a person as Jesus Christ? Imagine what that would be like.

Well, of course, we wouldn’t have such things as Christmas trees and Christmas carols. We wouldn’t have churches decorated for the birth of the Messiah, for there would be no church. Most of us would be strangers to each other.

Our culture would be completely different. Even though we now live in a secular, materialistic, and rationalistic society—a society increasingly hostile to Christ—yet under the skepticism and doubt is the Christian foundation of our culture. But such would not be the case if Christ had not come. Our example of leadership and government would be shaped by ancient Rome: the iron fist as our only example of authority.

There would be no gothic cathedrals, no country churches, and no hymns. A Bach cantata would be a testament to vanity.

There would be no Christian literature. Scrooge would never have met the ghost of Marley, because Dickens would never have been an Anglican.

If Christ had never come there would be no inspired lives of saints. St. Peter would never have walked on the water. St. Paul would have remained a man named Saul: a little bloody-thirsty Pharisee seeking to condemn others. Martha and Mary would never have seen their brother Lazarus alive again. Mary would never have seen the archangel Gabriel.

The Bible would end with the last phrase in the canonical Old Testament, Malachi 4:6: predicting that God would (quote) “come and smite the earth with a curse.”

If Christ had not come, words such love, joy, peace, and grace, would be empty of meaning, with no living example of these ever seen on the face of the earth. Right and wrong would be self-defined concepts changeable according to our opportunities to rob one another.

Our loved ones buried in the ground would be gone forever. Our lives indeed would be (in the words of Thomas Hobbes) short and brutish. Our lives would have no ultimate meaning. And our future would be only a cold, forsaken grave.

There would be no Christmas. December 25th would be a day like any other. A day to go to work. A day to clean the house. A day to die.

But, of course, Christ did come. He came because God loves you.

He came that you might have life, and have it more abundantly. He came to show you the way to heaven. He came to prove that your loved ones who die in the Lord, will live forever with Him. If we are Christians we will meet our loved ones and share love with them again.

Christ came to show us how one human being should treat another.

He came to show us the face of God.

Love, joy, peace and grace, are real, because He is real.

Because Christ came the Bible ends with this verse, from Revelation 22:21: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.”

Because Christ came, St. Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water. Saul became transformed: renamed Paul, he became the greatest of all the Apostles.

Lazarus lived. Mary saw the Archangel, and said, “behold the handmaid of the Lord.”

Because Christ came, we can see His love and power in the lives of the saints. The gothic cathedrals, built to last until the second coming, bear their glorious testimony to the faith of our forefathers.

Because Christ came, our parish here is a beacon of light and hope to those in despair.

Because Christ came, on the bottom of each page of music he wrote, Bach noted that it was composed only “for the glory of God.”

Scrooge met the ghost of Marley, because Dickens met Jesus.

Because Christ came, there are such things as Christmas trees, and Christmas carols. This is still a holy season.

Because Christ came, there is a church, spread throughout the world, and here in Lexington.

And you are here.

You are a part of a great Plan, God’s plan to redeem humanity from sin and death. He provided a way for you to follow Him, proving the truth of His teaching by His resurrection from the dead. He came to love you completely and eternally.

We may not live long enough to read the headline in the newspaper, “Christ Returns.” But just as surely as he came the first time, so either at his Second Advent or in our own death, we will meet Jesus face to face.

And so, in the midst of the merry-making of Christmas, I want you to take time this week to reflect on what Christ has meant in history, and to our culture. I want you to reflect on what Christ truly means to you.

And this Christmas, may God bless us, everyone. Amen.