

‘COME, LORD JESUS’

By DAVID STANLEY

DURING Advent, the Church abandons her habitual practice of addressing her liturgical prayer to God the Father, and, in most of the collects for this season, expresses directly to Christ himself her intense longing for his return. Her public, official supplication during this time of preparation is summed up in two words, *Veni, Domine*: ‘Come, Lord’. For the event which absorbs the Church’s attention during the Advent, Christmas, Epiphany cycle is the Lord’s *parousia*, the glorious second coming of her Spouse, which will form the climax and the termination of salvation history.

The hymns of the Roman Breviary for Advent display a remarkable preoccupation with the last judgment. The parousiac Christ is represented in his role as judge of living and dead. At Matins, we pray for the gift of light and love, that, ‘when the judge’s tribunal condemns the wicked to be burnt and his loving summons invites the faithful to the promised reward of heaven’, we may be admitted to the vision of God to enjoy the delights of heaven. At Lauds, we ask forgiveness of the Lamb of God, that ‘when he comes a second time, radiant with glory, and girds the world with fear, he may not exact the punishment our sins deserve, but become, in his loving kindness, our protector’. At Vespers, we address our plea for defence from our enemies directly to ‘the mighty judge of the last day’.

*Te deprecamur ultimae
magnum diei Judicem,
armis supernae gratiae
defende nos ab hostibus.*¹

Such stark realism, so characteristic of the Christian liturgy, may disconcert those of us for whom the crib, with its tender and nostalgic appeal, has perhaps become the central Christmas symbol. The Church, however, absorbed with the important business of representing the various facets of the Christian mystery, is never thus

¹ ‘We beseech you, the mighty judge of the last day, defend us with the weapons of heavenly grace from our enemies’.

distracted, not even in her commemoration of her Saviour's birth. The coming which forms the objects of her Advent prayer is not an imaginative one. Important as it was, Jesus' coming as a little child is now a matter of past history. He *has come* in poverty, humility, and the attractive helplessness of infancy.

The Christmas liturgy, of course, is, in part, a recall of Christ's first coming at Bethlehem. The Church commemorates that first manifestation, or epiphany, as the Pastoral epistles call it,¹ when 'God's gracious gift appeared, a source of salvation for all men, teaching us that by rejecting once for all impiety and the ideals of the world, we are to live a life of self-control and justice and piety in the present age, while we wait for the blessed hope, the manifestation of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ'.²

This Scriptural passage indicates the Church's reason for celebrating annually the birthday of her Lord. It is not a sentimental return to the past for its own sake, but a reminder intended to inspire our hearts with a joyful, loving expectancy of that future manifestation of the risen Christ's divine domination of the universe and of human history. The 'blessed hope' of Christmas, in the Church's liturgy, is the ardent longing for the parousia. The poverty and discomfort of the Christmas crib should warn us of the danger of becoming too comfortable in this world. It may be taken as a symbol of the undying discontent of even the irrational creation with its present status of frustration, and of that thirst displayed by the material universe for the 'glorious liberty of the children of God'.³

The message of Advent is much needed in our modern world, where the Christian has perhaps come to feel too much at home. The danger of foolishly reposing in the security which this world offers, is, as the Church is fully conscious, a perennial danger. It is the danger exemplified by the irresponsible overseer of the Gospel parable: 'My lord is long in coming'.⁴ It is occasionally found in a particularly virulent form among those who cynically scoff at the chief Christian hope. 'Where is his promised coming?', they will ask; 'Why, ever since our fathers fell asleep, everything has remained as it was from the beginning of creation'.⁵ The Christian of to-day has lost the sense of urgency, with its consequent fervent longing, which characterized the attitude of the primitive Church towards Christ's second coming.

True, this apathy is occasionally turned into morbid excitement,

¹ 2 Tim 1,10. ² Tit 2,11-13. ³ Rom 8,20-21. ⁴ Lk 12,45. ⁵ 2 Pet 3,4.

particularly in times of national or international calamity, by some who claim to be able to interpret certain mysterious affirmations of the Apocalypse so as to predict the end of the world. The widespread concern about 'the secret' contained in the Fatima letter was, in 1960, a similar phenomenon. We have only to turn to the New Testament to see that, from earliest times, the Church has always held with certainty to one truth concerning her Lord's return: he would come 'like a thief in the night',¹ when he is least expected. There will be no 'signs' by which men might foretell the date of Christ's parousia.

THE EXPECTATION OF EARLY CHURCH

In apostolic times, if we are to accept the evidence of the New Testament, it would appear that the majority of Christians took it for granted that their absent Lord was to return to them very soon. In his earlier letters, Paul seems to have assumed that it would happen in his own lifetime.² A cryptic remark of Jesus to John the apostle had given rise to the conjecture that the beloved disciple would not die before the parousia.³ John's death appears to have caused a crisis; and the disciple or disciples who edited his Gospel felt obliged to add an epilogue to his book, in order to explain Jesus' real meaning. Twice in the Apocalypse, the risen Christ says, 'I am coming soon'.⁴ 'The end of the universe has drawn near',⁵ says the author of the first Epistle of St. Peter, echoing a thought expressed by other New Testament writers.⁶

If from our vantage-point in history such an attitude may seem ingenuous, we should not fail to appreciate the values which this viewpoint undoubtedly contained. It was the heart, rather than the head, which fostered this opinion in the primitive Christian Church. That is to say, this desire for the return of Christ was simply an expression of their loyalty and devotion to the Master, who was enthroned in heaven. For, as we have seen, these same Christians were sure of only one thing: that they did not know 'the day or the date'.

JESUS' REFERENCES TO HIS SECOND COMING

When we examine our Lord's remarks about his return which have been preserved in the Gospels, we find that they are relatively

¹ 1 Thess 5,2; 2 Pet 3,10; Apoc 3,3; Lk 12,46. ² 1 Thess 4,15; 1 Cor 15,51.

³ Jn 21,23 ⁴ Apoc 3,11; 22,20. ⁵ 1 Pet 4,7.

⁶ 1 Cor 7,29; 10,11; Rom 13,11-12; Heb 10,25; 1 Jn 2,18.

rare. Moreover, his habit of referring to the destruction of the Temple as a 'coming' which would occur during the lifetime of many of his hearers, lent itself easily to misinterpretation. This mode of speech had, of course, been borrowed from the Old Testament prophets, who often described Israel's national calamities as a 'visitation' of Yahweh. Recent interpretation of the eschatological discourse on the ruin of Jerusalem found in all three Synoptic Gospels¹ tends to consider it as a prophecy, not of the end of the world, but simply as a prediction of the destruction of the city under Titus in the year 70.

Jesus did allude to his second coming by means of parables: that of the virgins,² of the talents.³ The Matthean description of the last judgment likewise contains a clear prophecy of the parousia,⁴ as does the Johannine discourse after the Last Supper.⁵ One receives, however, the distinct impression that during his public life Jesus did not choose to reveal the mystery of the parousia with any great degree of clarity. In Matthew, references to two distinct 'returns' have been fused together,⁶ while Luke connects the revelation of the second coming with the Lord's ascension.⁷ This deliberate obscurity in Jesus' words probably accounts, to some extent, for the expectation of a proximate parousia among the first generation of Christians.

THE PETRINE THEOLOGY OF HISTORY

In one of the most archaic sources of which Luke availed himself in writing the Acts of the Apostles, Peter formulates a view of Christian salvation-history which had a profound influence upon the pattern of evangelization in the apostolic age, and which gave an explanation of the meaning of the period between the first and second comings of Jesus Christ. Moreover, as we shall see, this insight has left its mark upon the Roman liturgy of Advent. In exhorting his fellow Jews to accept the Christian faith, the Primate of the Jerusalem community says:

Therefore, repent, and turn (to God) to have your sins wiped out, in order that a period of refreshment may come from the presence of the Lord, and he may send Jesus, the Messiah destined for you. Him heaven must hold until the era of the restor-

¹ Cf. Mt. 24,3-42.

² Mt 25,6.

³ Mt 25,19; cf. Lk 19,11-12,15.

⁴ Mt 25,31.

⁵ Jn 14,3-28; 16,16-22.

⁶ Mt 16,27-8.

⁷ Acts 1,11.

ation of all things, of which God spoke of old through the lips of his holy prophets.¹

The phrases, 'the period of refreshment' or 'the era of the restoration', had been employed by the Old Testament prophets in foretelling Israel's return from the Babylonian exile.² The prophets had predicted the restoration of the Davidic monarchy also at this period,³ but the pale reality of the exiles' return had been a disappointing fulfilment of these glowing promises. And indeed, the Davidic dynasty had never been restored. Israel's Persian overlords would not permit any Hebrew civil authority to rival that of their satraps. The forlorn Jewish hope of political domination, or even political autarchy, still survived in New Testament times. 'Lord', the disciples ask the ascending Christ, 'is it at this time that you will restore the sovereignty to Israel?'⁴

In the light of the Pentecostal revelation, Peter gave this yearning for 'the universal restoration' a new direction by applying it to Christ's coming in glory at the end of time. This glorious return of their exalted Lord Jesus, who had become master of the entire universe in virtue of his *sessio ad dexteram Patris*,⁵ would usher in the event for which Israel had been hoping vainly for centuries. It was, however, contingent upon Israel's conversion to the Christian Church. In the early years of the apostolic age, when, as Luke reports, the Gospel made such headway amongst the Jews of Palestine, this golden era of Christ's return must naturally have seemed very close to realization. While subsequent history would prove this view over-optimistic, still we see that it gave an orientation to the apostolic missionary effort. Even the great apostle of the Gentiles, Paul of Tarsus, made it his invariable practice to preach first to the Jews in the cities of the *Diaspora*. Only when his former co-religionists had rejected his message, did he turn his attention to pagans.⁶

Later in his missionary career, Paul was to enlarge this theology of history by making Israel's collective conversion, in its turn, contingent upon the entry of the pagans into the Church.⁷ We can see this same view, first enunciated by Peter, that the parousia would occur only after the effective conversion of mankind, operative in the view expressed in the Roman mass-formulae for Advent and

¹ Acts 3,19-21.

² Jer 31,16; 50,19; Ezek 16,53-50; Hos 11,11.

³ Amos 9,11; Ezek 34,23 ff; Zech 6;12 ff; 9,9 ff.

⁴ Acts 1,6.

⁵ Acts 2,33.

⁶ Acts 13,5,12,46; 14,1; 28,23 ff; Rom 1,16.

⁷ Rom 11,25.

Christmas. For the Church, during this season when she prays fervently for the second coming of Christ, constantly begs for the removal of the one great obstacle to the parousia, the sinfulness of her children. An example of this attitude is found in the collect for the fourth Sunday of Advent:

Stir up, we beseech, O Lord, your power and come, and aid us by your mighty intervention: that, by the help of your favour, what our sins impede may, through the forgiveness of your atonement, be hastened . . .

The thought of the parousia, which gave an impetus to the apostolic evangelization of the Mediterranean world, led to the creation of a distinctive spirituality. Since this view of the Christian life is exemplified abundantly in the writings of Paul, we shall study it in his letters.

THE PAROUSIAC ORIENTATION OF PAULINE SPIRITUALITY

The time of Christ's second coming in the Pauline epistles is habitually called 'the day of the Lord',¹ or 'the day of Christ',² or simply 'the day'.³ The apostle has borrowed the expression from the Old Testament prophets, who refer to the final crisis in human affairs as 'the day of Yahweh'. In the prophetic literature, it is most frequently a day of judgment; and hence a threatening, awful day, — 'a day of darkness, not light',⁴ 'a day of wrath, of anguish and affliction',⁵ 'flaming like an oven'.⁶ It is also a day of salvation,⁷ but the accent is on terror in the prophetic descriptions.

By way of contrast, in Paul, 'the day of the Lord' is usually associated with joy. The term 'parousia', which the apostle was the first to apply to it, has happy associations also. It was the technical term for a royal visit in the common Greek, which had become the *lingua franca* of the Mediterranean world. He calls his Thessalonian converts his 'joy and crown in the presence of our Lord Jesus, when he comes'.⁸ His Philippian Christians are 'something of which I can be proud on the day of Christ'.⁹ The second coming of Christ will be a happy day for the Christian, since it means principally reunion with their beloved Lord Jesus. Moreover, the parousia will cause the glorious resurrection of those who died in the Christian

¹ 1 Thess 5,2.

² Phil 1,10.

³ Rom 13,12.

⁴ Amos 5,18.

⁵ 2 Zeph 1,15.

⁶ Mal 3,19.

⁷ Zech 12,8; Amos 9,11.

⁸ 1 Thess 2,19.

⁹ Phil 2,16.

faith. 'If we believe that Jesus died and rose, so also will God bring those who have fallen asleep through Jesus together with him'.¹

Thus, Pauline spirituality, particularly in the letters from the early years, displays a marked eschatological orientation. The Christian life may be described as a 'waiting for God's Son from heaven',² as a 'walking in a fashion worthy of the God who is calling you into his glorious Kingdom',³ as an 'awaiting of the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ'.⁴ Even as late as the letter to the Romans, Paul asserts that 'our salvation is nearer than when we came to the faith . . . 'the day is dawning . . .'⁵

The hope of the second coming motivates Paul's constant prayers for his Christians: 'May the God of peace himself sanctify you through and through, and keep your entire selves, spirit, soul, body, irreproachable at the parousia of our Lord Jesus Christ'.⁶ He begs, for his Philippians, an increase of love, 'that you may arrive pure and irreproachable at the day of Christ'.⁷ In this same letter, Paul gives us perhaps his most striking picture of this parousiac spirituality, in speaking to men who were justifiably proud of their citizenship in a city-state, whose government was closely modelled upon that of Rome itself.

Our true city-state, however, exists in heaven. It is from there that we await, as Saviour, Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our wretched body, by giving it the character of his glorified body, through the deployment of that dynamic force that enables him to subject even the universe to himself.⁸

Salvation, for a Semite steeped in the biblical viewpoint as Paul was, affects the whole man, in his material not less than in his spiritual aspect. Accordingly, the Christian is not definitively 'saved' until, upon the glorified Christ's return, his corporeal nature is transformed. It is 'the redemption of our bodies'⁹ which is the culmination of all Christian ascetical endeavour for Paul.

Since this will be realized by the parousiac Christ at his second coming, the thought of 'the day of the Lord' is, for the apostle, a continuing source of deepest joy and true Christian security: 'Rejoice unceasingly in the Lord. Yes, I repeat: rejoice. Let your self-assurance radiate before all men. The Lord is close at hand'.¹⁰

¹ 1 Thess 4,14.

² 1 Thess 1,1.

³ 1Thess 2,12.

⁴ 1 Cor 1,7.

⁵ Rom 13,11-12.

⁶ 1 Thess 5,23.

⁷ Phil 1,10.

⁸ Phil 3,20-21.

⁹ Rom 8,23.

¹⁰ Phil 4,4-5.

The Greek term, which we have rendered 'self-assurance', a borrowing from the philosophical vocabulary of Stoicism, almost defies translation, for Paul is giving it a new Christian content. In the face of this life's vicissitudes, the quality that will endear him to all is his calm self-possession, an unobtrusive, kindly condescension, which springs from his assurance of the proximity of his own salvation. And the basis of this imperturbable certainty is the hope that the Lord is soon to come again. This, as Père Benoit has remarked, 'ought to give the Christian that calm and accommodating outlook with regard to the contingencies of this world', so necessary for his peace of mind and so attractive to those outside the Christian Church. The phrase, 'the Lord is close at hand', is an allusion to one of the very rare remnants of the primitive Christian Aramaic liturgy, celebrated in Palestine, which have come down to us. Paul cites the words in their original form to the Corinthians: *Maranatha*, 'Come, our Lord'.¹ It would appear to have been an acclamation, sung at the Eucharistic breaking of the Bread, and it expressed the Church's fervent longing for the return of her ascended Master.

THE PAROUSIA AND THE EUCHARIST

This brings us to consider the connection between the Eucharistic liturgy and the second coming, which Paul points out in his first letter to the Corinthians.

In commenting upon Jesus' command to repeat what he had done at the Last Supper, Paul remarks: 'As often as you eat this bread and drink of the cup, you are proclaiming the death of the Lord, until he comes'.² The theological viewpoint underlying this assertion may sound strange to us who have, particularly since the Council of Trent, been accustomed to stress the link between the Mass and Calvary. Paul does not neglect this element: indeed, the Eucharist (no less than the Gospel) is a proclamation, a heralding of Christ's redemptive death. But it is a commemoration of the death of *the Lord*, i.e. of the risen Christ, who has attained supreme sovereignty over all creation.

The connection between the Eucharistic liturgy and Christ's resurrection is perhaps less often alluded to in our day than it appears to have been in the primitive Church. Luke tells us that the celebration of the Eucharist in the Jerusalem community was carried out 'with intense joyfulness'.³

¹ 1 Cor 16,22.

² 1 Cor 11,26.

³ Acts 2,46.

This was no doubt caused by the memory that the post-resurrection appearances of the Master had constantly occurred, as our Gospels would appear to suggest, in the course of a meal. For Paul, the repetition of the Last Supper, the breaking of the bread, which, at least in Corinth, was performed during a communal meal,¹ was reminiscent also of the second coming. This sacramental 'coming' of the risen Christ was an anticipation of his parousia, and as such, calculated to awaken an intense desire in the communicants for 'the day of Christ'. As the Lord Jesus had come to his disciples so often during a meal after his own resurrection, might it not be presumed that he would come back to them in glory, while they partook of the Eucharist in loving obedience to his last command?

BAPTISM AND THE PAROUSIA

Baptism, the Christian sacrament of initiation into the Church, also bears a relation to Christ's second coming, as Paul points out in Ephesians. 'Do not grieve the Spirit, by whom you have been sealed for the day of redemption'.² The context of this remark is an exhortation to unity: the Holy Spirit is saddened by anything which militates against the unifying love, which binds together the members of Christ's Body. 'It is this Holy Spirit', Paul has already remarked, 'who is the pledge of our heritage, who prepares the redemption of the people God has acquired for himself'.³ The preparation for this redemption, which will become a reality through Christ's parousia,⁴ is being carried out by the sacramental grace of Baptism. Paul has suggested this same idea to the Philippians: 'I am sure moreover of this very thing: that he, who has begun this excellent work in you, will carry it to completion until the day of Christ Jesus'.⁵

The necessity of maintaining Christian unity in view of the parousia is asserted also by the author of the epistle to the Hebrews. 'Do not desert your own assembly . . . but encourage one another, — the more so, since you see the day drawing near'.⁶

THE CHRISTIAN LITURGY OF THE PAROUSIA

The author of the epistle to the Hebrews represents Jesus' redemptive death by means of a comparison with the sacrifice, offered on the Day of Atonement, by the high priest of Judaism.⁷ He also

¹ 1 Cor 11,18 ff.

² Eph 4,30.

³ Eph 1,14.

⁴ 1 Cor 15,23.

⁵ Phil 1,6.

⁶ Heb 10,25.

⁷ Heb 9,25 ff.

illustrates the redemptive character of Christ's parousia within this same liturgical frame of reference: 'so also Christ, having offered himself once to take away the sins of the rest of men, is to appear a second time, apart from sin, to those who await him to (give them) salvation'.¹ Just as the high priest, having completed the ritual of expiation in the holy of holies, returned to the people who stood waiting for him outside the sanctuary; so the parousiac Christ will return in glory, bringing to those who hope in his parousia the perfection of their salvation through the resurrection of the just. As Père Spicq has observed, the Christian is defined frequently in the New Testament as one who longs for the parousia, awaiting with almost anxious expectancy the return of Christ as Saviour.²

It was left for John, in his Apocalypse, to portray the very life and the whole activity of the Church upon earth as a daily liturgy, orientated towards the triumphant return of her glorified Lord. The idea of the parousia dominates this, the only prophetic book of the New Testament, from its inaugural vision to its final chapter. The apparition of the risen Christ, the Lord of history, with which the book opens, presents him as 'the one coming upon the clouds'.³ And this picture reappears twice over in the course of John's development.⁴

But it is in the epilogue that we are made to see how central, in the spirituality of the apostolic age, was the hope of the second coming. 'Remember, I am coming soon', says the voice of Christ:⁵ 'Remember, I am coming soon, bringing with me the reward to give each man according to his works'.⁶

And presently the Church is heard making her reply as the affianced bride of the Lamb that has been slain. With the aid of the Spirit, she responds to his promise to return to her. For it is the Holy Spirit alone who comprehends the joy that is contained in the longing cry to the heavenly Christ to return to his own. The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come'.⁷ The Church through the inspired writer bids the Christian reader take up the same cry: 'Let him who hears say, Come'.⁸ And as the book ends, we hear the voice of Christ, 'the faithful Witness',⁹ summing up his testimony to the Christian: 'He who gives this testimony says, Yes, I am coming soon'.¹⁰ To which

¹ Heb 9,28.

² 1 Thess 1,10; Phil 3,20; 1 Cor 1,7; Tit 2,13; Lk 12,36.

³ Apoc 1,7.

⁴ Apoc 14,14-16; 19,11-16.

⁵ Apoc 22,7.

⁶ Apoc 22,12.

⁷ Apoc 22,17a.

⁸ Apoc 22,17b.

⁹ Apoc 1,5.

¹⁰ Apoc 22,20a.

the voice of the Church replies, in the words employed in the early Aramaic liturgy, *Maranatha*: 'Amen: come, Lord Jesus'.¹

THE PAROUSIA IN THE ADVENT-CHRISTMAS LITURGY

We have already referred to the predominance, in the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle of the Roman liturgy, of this same ardent aspiration for the second coming of Christ. It remains to mention here two striking examples of the theme. The first, found in the collect for the vigil of Christmas, may seem strange: into her last-minute preparations for our Lord's birthday, the Church introduces the idea of the final judgment; moreover, she suggests that the thought ought to inspire, not dread, but joy. 'O God, who causes us to rejoice each year at the prospect of our redemption, grant that we may, without fear, behold your only Son, Jesus Christ, whom we welcome with joy as redeemer, coming also as judge...'

The second example in our liturgy in which the picture of the parousiac Christ, inspired no doubt by the opening vision of the Apocalypse, appears, is found in the Introit for the Sunday within the octave of Epiphany. The passage is unusual in this, that it is not a direct citation of Scripture: 'I beheld, seated upon a lofty throne, a man whom a host of angels adore, as they chant with one voice, See, the name of his dominion is eternal'. As she closes this season, in which she directs her mind and heart to the return of her exalted Lord, the Church presents her children with her own representation of the parousiac Christ in glory.

CONCLUSION

This aspect of the Christian Mystery, the object of such vivid hope and fervent desire in apostolic times, which the Christian people are perhaps in danger of neglecting, despite the Church's annual reminder in the Christmas-Advent season, has a significant contribution to make nowadays to Christian spirituality. Recalling, as it does, the consoling truth that the risen Christ is master of human history, it is an infallible source of that security for which our world is anxiously searching. Moreover, the contemplation of Christ's parousia, with the glorious resurrection of the body which it will effect, is capable of redressing the balance in an asceticism or spirituality almost exclusively preoccupied with 'saving one's soul'. The New Testament hope in the second coming testifies that Chris-

¹ Apoc 22,20b.

tian redemption includes not merely the spiritual side, but also the material side of our human nature. It shows the incompleteness of any theology of grace which contents itself with a discussion of the supernatural elevation of man's soul, intellect and will, and neglects the effects of grace upon his imagination, his emotions, his passions. Finally, the thought of Christ's parousia, particularly as presented by Paul, counters the limited view that our salvation is an individualistic concern, by teaching that the redemption will in some way embrace the entire material, inanimate creation.¹ The Christ who will return to us as Saviour at the end of history is Lord of the universe, and the redemption he brings is of cosmic proportions.

¹ Rom 8,19-22.