Adv2(2023)

**ANNOUNCEMENTS**:

Wednesday was St. Nicholas day. He was a 4th Century Greek saint who lived in Myra on the southern coast of Turkey. St. Nicholas' parents died during an epidemic and he was raised by his uncle, a bishop himself .

 When **Nicholas** became a bishop he was a defender against the great Arian heresy which held that Jesus was the son of God but created by Him and not **pre**-existing. Thus, Jesus was NOT God's **equal**.

 Among many legends good saint Nick was known to put coins into folks' shoes which had been left outside. This might have contributed to the beginning of the birth of his namesake: St. Nick, ala Santa Claus. In many parts of the world St. Nicholas day is a day of joy for children. In Germany children typically receive a chocolate St. Nick (to help toward Christmas).

St. Nicholas **and** his relics are associated with many miracles and thus he is often nicknamed: The Wonderworker. Some of his relics are in Bari, Italy near Naples. The rest, however, are in Venice.

 Now among traditional Anglicans, today often has been known as, “Scripture Sunday”. It got this nickname because of today's major Propers, especially our **opening** Collect and Epistle. Both the collect and Epistle use the same phrase that all Scripture has been, "written for our learning". While today's lessons all were carried over from the pre-Reformation English *Sarum* liturgy, today's opening collect was written by Archbishop Cranmer himself, as was last week’s for the season.

This was at the height of the Reformation when Reformers sought to increase ordinary people's Bible knowledge. Thus, we prayed to "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" Scripture.

 The phrase "inwardly digest" is quite colorful since it alludes Scripture to **food**. We all know that any food from chocolate to burgers is more fun to chew then simply "scarf" down. One engages more tastebuds and takes away more pleasure from the whole experience. Indeed, in wine-tastings one “chews” the wine before, sadly, spitting it out.

 Similarly, we talk about "chewing on that", on an idea for a while. So, we are to treat Scripture as food for our soul and ponder the words letting our mind and soul taste them.

 Our Epistle instructs that all Scripture was written for our education. What can we learn then from our lessons today? Well, in short, that today also might well be named “Hope Sunday”. That word--hope-- appears once in our opening collect, and **thrice** in our Epistle from Paul.

 While neither our **seasonal** collect nor our Gospel expressly use that word, they both certainly are **hope-**filled especially in talking about the Second Coming. We then are to “look up”, lifting up and not bury our heads for our “redemption draweth nigh”. At that time we shall “rise to the life immortal”. Rising to life immortal is also in our seasonal collect.

*"So likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand*." *+*

 Our Gospel takes place in the final few days of Jesus' earthly life. Last week we heard of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and casting out of the moneychangers. Since that moment he had been preaching on the Temple's very steps. He just had seen the widow cast in her mite and his disciples were observing the costly stones adorning the Temple.

 It was here that Jesus began a very lengthy discourse to his followers about the END, first of Jerusalem and then, of the world we see. His disciples, as we would, asked him, "how will we know when this is?"

 The lessons in Advent build upon each other. Last week we heard of Jesus arrival in Jerusalem, today we heard about his **second** arrival in great glory. Jesus here recounts the signs that will precede his Second coming.

 He relates that there will be great wars, earthquakes, famines and pestilences. Jerusalem will be fallen. Then there will be signs in the skies, the sun and the moon and the stars, and in the oceans. Needless to say, this is a pretty dark picture our Lord is painting: "Men's hearts failing for fear", he said himself. The powers of heaven itself even being shaken. At the culmination Jesus will reappear in glory "with clouds descending" and
"robed in dreadful majesty", as our recessional last week sang.

 This dramatic discourse is also recounted in St. Matthew and in St. Mark. St. Paul also writes about it to his followers, especially to the Thessalonians. Yet, in all of these discussions there remains **one** promise: **hope** for believers. The day will be utterly terrifying, as earthquakes, wars, famines, pestilences, typhoon and hurricanes always are. But, we are to "lift up our heads" because the time of our redemption has arrived.

 Pastors and soothsayers have been looking for these end times ever since. Martin Luther, in a sermon about a year after his excommunication, and one where he also had some choice words about the pope, seemed to believe that these end times were just around the corner. Well that was almost 500 years ago.

 I find it important to note here the modern Evangelical interest in "**The Rapture**". Very simply put: this is the belief that Jesus suddenly will appear either after a period of great tribulation or just before it, and capture the really good folks up to heaven. All the rest on earth--depending upon the internal fundamentalist debate as to whether the Great Tribulation already has happened or not-- either will experience a thousand years of terrible turmoil (the more common view) OR a millennium which is a glorious time for Christianity before The Last Judgment finally shows up.

 Yet a "catching up" separated in time from The Last Judgment is not traditional Christian theology. Jesus will not come to earth **THREE** times. When Jesus does arrive the next time after The Great Tribulation it will be akin to a lightning bolt or earthquake: **suddenly**. This will be His Second Coming and the beginning of the Last Judgment.

Interestingly, while the concept of a Rapture separated from The Last Judgment is very popular among Fundamentalist Christians and makes for great TV and movies, it actually has its origins in a fictional work written by a renegade Chilean Jesuit in the mid-1800s, Manuel Lacunza.

 For the moment, it is obvious that the end times have not yet begun, although that could change in an hour. Yet, while the big "Day of the Lord" has not yet arrived, in an **individual** sense the Lord's promise already is occurring. For each of us this world **is** very much passing away.

 Every day our time on earth become shorter; we grow ever nearer to the end. And just like a thief in the night, we never know when the actual time of our departure will arrive. "Now is our salvation nearer", is the phrase St. Paul told the Roman church in our Epistle last week.

 The big day of judgment for the world and all mankind is still at some uncertain point in the future, but it **will** arrive. A nice parallel for today's Gospel may be seen in Tolkien's ring trilogy in, "*The Hobbit*".

 If you have read the books or seen these movies you will recall the great final battle at the very end against Sauron in the dark land of Mordor. But, building up to that we see how the world has been threatened by ever encroaching evil. Significantly, the hobbits and others are not able to stave off darkness' advance despite their noble and kindly lives.

 The Fellowship of the Ring is formed by the Hobbits with others of kindred spirit: the elves, dwarves, and knights. The source of the evil--**POWER**--symbolized in "the ring", must be destroyed at its **source**. And thus the daily trek, with all its actual assaults and all its temptations to give up or to indulge in the power of the Ring must be undertaken. To the wise Gandalf anyway, an apocalyptic confrontation is... inevitable.

 I am not the first to comment about the heavy Christian symbolism within the trilogy. Tolkien was a very devout Catholic whose son became a Catholic priest. He intentionally wove Christianity throughout the Trilogy.

 The inevitability of this final time, this final moment, the end of our age is carried out throughout all of Advent. The daily NT reading for each evening prayer until Christmas eve is continually from the *The Book of Revelation*, or as it is called elsewhere: "*The Book of the Apocalypse*".

 We might know already that "Revelation" is all about the end of this age, the age of the time of the Church on earth, the great final battle, the end of Satan and evil, and the dawn of the new, the never ending age.

As the Ring Trilogy develops towards **its** great final battle, the Elves, Dwarves, and Hobbits represent the cardinal virtues of temperance, fortitude, justice, and prudence--or as we might say today "restraint, courage, fairness, and carefulness" in a world quickly going to ruin.

 Those in "the Fellowship" defend neither power nor passion, but the **little things** represented by their home and their beloved shire: the free family, the domestic world, joy and love. They enter into this noble trek because it is... the right thing to do. It had to be done. They are determined to save the shire and Middle Earth. Perhaps the Fellowship was inspired by St. Peter's own admonishment in his Second letter : "Honor all men; Love the brotherhood; Fear God; Honor the king".

 As we go through our daily lives we often run into temptation, maybe to exercise power over others in some way or to turn away from what we know is the right path, the virtuous or noble path. It is the path leading through pain and onward always to yet another temptation, another battle. We often may perceive ever growing darkness and dangers all around: anti-family, anti-Christianity on the march everywhere.

 We need to remember that just as a final apocalyptic battle was necessary to destroy the ever present evil spreading from Mordor through Middle-Earth a final battle also **will** someday occur on earth to destroy the devil and the evil ever present on earth. Evil will not depart just because many on earth resist it, be they hobbits or humans.

 *Revelation* shows that many actually will **not** become Christian. Thus, the battle can **not** be avoided; it is inevitable. But, ultimately we as believers will survive and enjoy redemption. In the darkness that will someday certainly come also will be our HOPE.

 On this Hope Sunday let us remember that each time we allow the Spirit to operate within us, each one of us develops further into someone accomplishing great, yet unseen, deeds on Christianity's daily trek towards "the inevitable".

Most likely none of us will live to see the End Times much less the final battle. We will not be around to see how our seemingly small contributions aided the cause of others who completed the trek.

 In our own lives our challenge remains to become, in our own way: the knights of Earth protecting **our** own shire. Amen. +