

When He Shall Appear

From the Collect and Epistle: I St. John iii. 1
Sixth Sunday After Epiphany

THE COLLECT.

O God, whose blessed Son was manifested that he might destroy the works of the devil, and make us the sons of God, and heirs of eternal life: Grant us, we beseech thee, that, having this hope, we may purify ourselves, even as he is pure; that, when he shall appear again with power and great glory, we may be made like unto him in his eternal and glorious kingdom; where with thee, O Father, and thee, O Holy Ghost, he liveth and reigneth, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

THE EPISTLE. 1 S. John 3. 1

BEHOLD, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure. Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law. And ye know that he was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin. Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him. Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous. He that committeth sin is of the devil: for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.

If I were hoping for the return of a loved one or a cherished friend, how might that influence me in the here-and-now? There would be little else I could think about. The fact of the impending return would preoccupy me more and more, especially as the time grew shorter and the anticipated day approached. I would be attempting to prepare myself in some fashion for the arrival. If it were a son or a daughter or grandchild, I would be readying the home as best I could. I would not want to dishonor a loved one by failing to make adequate preparations. I would spend much time straightening things up, cleaning and refreshing their room, going over the whole house to make things as welcoming and orderly and cozy as possible, trying in every way to demonstrate how much I love the expected guest by carefully and assiduously arranging for their arrival. I would be horrified if they had to return to a home which by its lack of readiness would seem to imply that I didn't care.

My preparation would reflect the nature of the person I was expecting and the kind of relationship I have with them. If I knew someone to be fastidious, demanding, or a perfectionist, I would probably be involved in an exasperated effort to fix things just so, dreading their criticism and disfavor. I would be driven by fear and compulsion, and might not at all be looking forward to their arrival. But if on the other hand I knew the person to be relaxed, easy going, uncritical, and inclined to ask for little, I might find my labors much simpler, less complicated, and far more

pleasant. For that matter, I could even in that case be inclined to be careless and indifferent and neglectful in my efforts. Best, of course, would be that when called upon to play the host, I gave it my very best shot, treating each and every guest as if they were the most special of all.

This practice of high hospitality was brought home to me recently in a *Touchstone* article entitled *Dining on Tradition* (Joanne L. Canda). The author is writing about special dinner occasions when she brings out her grandmother's china for use at the meal. She notes, "To our forbears, acquiring valuable china and silver flatware was worth the financial sacrifice because setting a beautiful table did not just mean flowers and napkins. There was emotional and cultural weight to a formal table setting. Family and friends were invited to share what was the very best to be offered. You would dress nicely for a Sunday or holiday dinner, and so the table was dressed nicely, too. There would be a certain formality about what on other days were common activities. The idea was not to intimidate the table guests but to honor them, to create something special for those who were special to the host and hostess."

But let's consider these things as we turn to the subject at hand, to which today's collect and scriptures pertain. Christ is coming. And even if I do not know the day or hour, nor the exact circumstances, and should His appearing be long delayed, I want my heart, my life, to be ready for Him. Biblical passages dealing with preparedness for this event are numerous, which may seem strange to us, since the topic of Christ's second coming appears to occupy the minds of our Christian forbears, two millennia ago, with far more intensity than our own. The Lord Himself warned us to be watchful, awake, diligent, and resourceful, as did the apostolic writers. We are to be alert, sober, unattached to this world and its concerns, just like travelers who are prepared to leave at a moment's notice.

This matter has been pushed off into a corner somewhere, out of sight and out of mind, like something that is too quaint and ridiculous to consider. Many who have been preoccupied with it are engaged in wild and groundless speculation, an embarrassment to those who earnestly hope that the Second Advent --an event both dire and serious, as well as embodying the deepest hopes of the believer-- be given its just due.

The prevailing attitude is: who has time for such things, anyway? The world is convulsed with great social upheavals, and portentous change, and America is jockeying for its place on the international scene. A lot more appears to hang upon the decisions of men --crucial decisions that affect the future of nations-- than upon a fantastic promise made two thousand years ago by some obscure Jew, confirmed by His followers, that still awaits fulfillment. Our temptation is to

dismiss the whole idea as utterly irrelevant and totally removed from us in any practical sense, having no apparent bearing on either how we live our lives, or on the unfolding of current events.

But is it so? Scripture urgently propels us in the opposite direction from such easy dismissals. We are to be a people whose preoccupation is the return of our Lord. (Quote 1 Tim. 6:13-16). We are to long for, anticipate, earnestly seek, prepare ourselves, focus upon, and pre-eminently “love His appearing” (2 Tim. 4:8b).

In particular, we are to *purify ourselves as He is pure*. This is an imperative, I think, especially for Western Christians, as the world appears awash with impurity. Imagine, if you would, that a large city sewer main has broken, spewing its contents out through the streets, relentlessly filling homes, gardens, and sidewalks with reeking, foul uncleanness. It is a rupture that no one will fix, because no one has the will to fix it. Onward continues the awful flow, spreading so constantly and pervasively that after a while few can remember what it was like to live without the stench and filth. Over the course of time, proponents of this awful flood arise, championing it as the new order, heaping scorn and condemnation upon those who are its desperate critics. And though the whole land sinks underneath its sickening influence, the culture reels and disintegrates, families fall apart, hope and idealism are lost, and all are suffocating to death, yet the sewage flows ever onward and outward.

Purify ourselves... What does this mean? Under the circumstances in which we live, we'll have to work very hard to make things ready. We have wandered far from a standard of propriety fitting to welcome such a Guest. Our finest china, our Sunday best, which would do justice to such a visitor have been forgotten somewhere in storage. How can we start the process of recovering them? Loving and reading God's Word. Cultivating our prayer life. Cleaving to the things of God and despising and avoiding what is contrary to Him. Seeking the fellowship of the Church. Taking stock of ourselves.

For just at the moment they least expect it, then will the Son of Man come. Just when the world is convinced that God has been effectively banished, and we are on the verge of proving that we no longer need Him, just then will He arrive. Just when the din is loudest, the party its jolliest, self-assurance at its peak, just when the world is about to erupt in an unprecedented shout of self-congratulation-- then will our Lord return.

May we meet Him not with shocked surprise, but a welcoming smile!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.