

New Year's Resolution
(From the Collect & Epistle: *Romans 13:8-14*)

***The Collect:** Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious Majesty, to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, now and ever. Amen.*

***8** Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. **9** For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. **10** Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. **11** And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. **12** The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. **13** Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness [NIV: sexual immorality and debauchery], not in strife and envying. **14** But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.*

Within Christ's Church, Advent is observed as a penitential season. To those unfamiliar with the church calendar, this fact comes as a stark surprise. Every year there seems to be something we could call "Christmas creep" that extends itself ever earlier into the fall. Within the world of consumerism where most of us are obliged to walk, the decorations, the lure of gifts, the constant presence of seasonal music, unite to impose upon us the theme of pleasure, joy, and delight which is the expected emotion associated with this time of year.

It is more than significant that many people find themselves sacrificed on the altar of the incredibly high expectations that Christmas brings. Personal losses, disappointments, financial struggles, family issues all loom like dark shadows against the almost blinding backdrop of the incredible show and clamor these weeks are filled with. One hears people mutter --yes, even us, within the privacy of our own thoughts-- "I can't wait until it's all over! I just can't live up to the Christmas ideal that is being pushed upon me vigorously from every quarter."

But it is for precisely this reason that the Church of Christ can rejoice in the fact that Advent calls us to penitence. It is a painful process, that, once successfully worked through, should lead us precisely to the endpoint of great rejoicing and exaltation that are indeed the proper response to God's greatest gift to man: His Son, Jesus Christ. It isn't unsurprising that the world, outside the Church, places itself on the fast track to get the goods --all the pleasures of the season-- without the payment.

If we were to review the BCP lectionary leading up to this Sunday, we would quickly see that God's people are being urged to follow a different course. The prophet Joel is among the readings:

1:13 Gird yourselves, and lament, ye priests: howl, ye ministers of the altar: come, lie all night in sackcloth, ye ministers of my God...14 Sanctify ye a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the LORD your God, and cry unto the LORD, 15 Alas for the day! for the day of the LORD is at hand, and as a destruction from the Almighty shall it come...2:1 Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain: let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for the day of the LORD cometh, for it is nigh at hand; 2 A day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness, as the morning spread upon the mountains...12 Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: 13 And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.

The Second Epistle of the Apostle Peter is also included:

10 But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. 11 Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, 12 Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? 13 Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.

I have entitled today's sermon *New Year's Resolution*, not because January 1st is fast approaching, but because, within the tradition of the Church calendar, we are at the beginning of a new ecclesial year. Today we turn way back in our BCP's to p. 90 and begin the whole process once again of walking with our Lord through His life and ministry. Advent is the first of our sacred seasons. During this time we contemplate His coming to earth 2000 years ago to be our Savior, and look forward to His Second Coming as our reigning King.

The Collect and Epistle call not for emotions, but for actions, and this is where I want to place my emphasis. Significantly, one phrase is present in both of them: *let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light*. This is to be our "new year's resolution", and it is one that cannot be fulfilled unless one first identifies the *works of darkness*. Several, of course, are identified in the text, but in order to make this resolution intensely personal, we must each scrutinize our own lives and ask: "With what 'works of darkness' am I involved?" Is this text speaking of physical darkness, like a moonless night? Perhaps, and certainly evil is rampant when men least expect it to be detected, while all is in shadow. But in an age where the law of God is largely ignored and trampled upon, there is a general darkness, a spiritual darkness, that sets men free from all restraint. It is the thickest of nights, even in broad daylight: *For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people...* (Is. 60:2). In such a time, *works of darkness*, are not the exception, but the rule. Because they are so widely accepted, promoted, and encouraged, we cease to think of them as such. There used to be in America something we might call a collective conscience, whereby people in general accepted prohibi-

tions against certain behavior, and encouragement toward good and virtuous standards. The fact that society underwrote these principles encouraged each individual conscience to also be informed by them.

But today, gambling casinos occupy the best and most prominent spots in many a community. Thousands of stores invite the abandonment of financial scruples for the purchase of what Americans once would have scorned as complete recklessness and foolishness, and the embarrassment at being caught doing so is gone. The media continue pushing vigorously back against the ever weakening walls of restraint that once protected all that was considered acceptable and moral. Since grandparents, and parents, and other mentors have not only thrown their hands helplessly into the air in response and caved in to the onslaught, but also actually reached out themselves to grab it all and greedily gobble it up, there has been virtually not a prayer of hope for their children. And, of course, the very laws of the land are being rewritten to codify the choices that are being made and to make difficult or even illegal any opposition to them.

Cast away the works of darkness! I cannot, I must not, participate in any of it! How can I preach standards that I myself don't obey? I have no excuse. I know what God's Word says about all of these things, and I have my own Holy Spirit-influenced conscience to testify against me. Do we all sense the burden of God's people in times like these, and the actions that are incumbent upon us?

Once I have identified these *works* and am doing my best, day by day, to *cast them away*, I must then *put on the armor of light*. What does this mean? Our text mentions several of the Ten Commandments, and how they are summarized in *loving our neighbor as ourself*. We are advised to *walk honestly*. But most critically, we are told to *put ye on* [NIV: clothe yourselves with] *the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof*.

Wintertime means putting on lots of clothing: maybe a union suit, a flannel shirt, sweater, vest, and thick coat, gloves, one pant leg, one sleeve, one glove at a time, until we are completely prepared against the cold. But here we are told to *put on the Lord Jesus Christ*. He is to cover us like a warm garment. We are to fit perfectly, so to speak, inside Him, completely protected and armored against the very things that are tearing apart the world that surrounds us. *And make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof*. The *flesh* --my human nature that tends to sin-- is not my friend. I dare not try to treat it like a half-starved wild animal, throwing it scraps and bones just to make sure I keep it alive, in case I need it.

One word from the Collect yet needs our attention, and I think it will underscore the necessity of our Advent meditations being penitential: it is the word *now: now in the time of this mortal life*. *Now* means not tomorrow, which invites procrastination and delay, nor yesterday, which is gone. *Now* means this present moment, which is all we have to work with. *Now* is the

raw material with which we can build the assurance and certainty that will allow us to welcome Christ's return without fear. *Now* is where the divine spotlight always focuses. *Now* is all we possess. And it is what I do with all the *nows* of life which will determine the nature of "forever" for me.

As we proceed through Advent, let's assist one another in fulfilling this resolution to *cast off the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light*. This is not a one-time accomplishment, but a continual commitment. The reward for doing so will bring with it all the brightness and loveliness of Christmas as well, because it extracts Christmas from the merely sentimental and romantic and makes it into something just as real as life itself. We become actual participants with our Lord in His suffering and redemption, as we look to Him to complete His work of saving us and bringing us to eternal life. How lovely now is His humble creche, where Mary and Joseph bow in adoration, and all the world falls silence in awe! How joyful are the carols and songs that celebrate His birth! How hopeful and inspiring is the thought of His return, when all evil will be banished! *The night is far spent, the day is at hand!*

"O come, o come, Emmanuel!"

Even so, Come Lord Jesus! (Rev. 22:20)

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