

415 The Comings of the Lord

This week the traditional season of “Advent”, “Coming To”, approaches its culmination in, to give it its full Book of Common Prayer title, “The Nativity of our Lord, or the Birth-Day of Christ, Commonly Called Christmas Day”. It is appropriate therefore that this time we remind ourselves of the promised “comings of the Lord” that are still to occur.

The “nativity of our Lord” saw in that tiny Baby the coming of the long-promised, long-expected “seed of the woman” (Genesis 3.15); “the King of the Jews” (Matthew 2.2); the Messiah for God’s covenant people, “the house of Israel” (Luke 1.54-55, 67-79 / Matthew 15.24-28); and “good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people”. No wonder then that “a multitude of the heavenly host” burst forth in praise to God! (Luke 2.10,13-14).

But Jesus was rejected by His own (Isaiah 53.2 / John 1.11). Through Him God the Father fulfilled the Covenant of Law and introduced the Covenant of Grace, with salvation now granted to all, be they Jew or Gentile, who put their faith in “Jesus Christ as Lord” (egs., Matthew 5.17 / John 14.6 / Acts 4.12 / Romans 3.21-26; 10.9 / Ephesians 2.1-22).

After Jesus’ ascension came the promise of His return “in like manner” (Acts 1.9-11), which we now concentrate on in this Reflection.

In these Reflections we accept the “pre-Millennial” view regarding Jesus’ return, (that is, that He will return to this earth before He establishes His kingdom here), for two solid reasons: first, this view is the most consistent with how biblical prophecy has been fulfilled so far, that is, by a literal, detailed fulfilment while allowing for the use of occasional symbolism and imagery to convey spiritual truths; and second, this pre-Millennial view was held by the Early Church until the early 4th century, when unfortunately “Rome took over”.

Scripturally we learn that Jesus’ promised future coming will take place in two distinct stages. The first is the “seizing-away” of the true Church, known as “the Rapture”, made known to us primarily in I Thessalonians 4.13-18 and I Corinthians 15.51-52. This startling event is widely ignored these days yet for no good reason. A simple comparison of the above I Thessalonians passage with those of the “Olivet discourse” (Matthew 24 and parallels) - the second stage of Jesus’ promised return - shows that this seizing-away will involve only the true, believing Church, while the

Lord's public, visible return in glory comes later, and is focussed on the Jews and the Gentile nations.

Between these two stages of Christ's coming-again occurs the 7-year span of "the tribulation". Put briefly, this will be a re-run of Daniel's "seventieth week" (Daniel 9.27, the first running of that week the Lord God having "blotted out" because His Son was rejected). Its length will mirror the 7-year span of the ministry of John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus, but this time with Satan, the antichrist, the beast and the false prophet all hard at work; the second half of this future "week" is termed "the time of Jacob's trouble" and "the great tribulation" (Jeremiah 30.7 / Matthew 24.21).

Even in the Tribulation the Gospel will be proclaimed, by believing Jews and "the two witnesses" (Revelation 14.1 / 11.3-11), and many will come to faith in Christ, of whom many though will be martyred (Revelation 20.4). It will thus be a fearfully grim time of divine judgment on Jew and Gentile, to be ended by Jesus' visible return as Messiah and Judge (Zechariah 12.9-10), followed by the establishment of His kingdom on the earth (egs., Matthew 6.10 / Revelation 20.1-6).

Thanks be to God, the Holy Spirit tells us through Paul that Jesus has "delivered us from the wrath to come" (I Thessalonians 1.10, the tense of the Greek word translated "delivered" being defined as a "past tense with present effect"). This indicates that the true Church will have been "seized away" into heaven before the 7-year tribulation period on the earth, "so we shall always be with the Lord ... Wherefore comfort one another with these words" (I Thessalonians 4.17b-18).

The prospect of this "pre-Tribulation Rapture" clearly brings us great assurance, but also of course provokes our great concern for those among whom we live who have not yet accepted Christ as their Redeemer, Saviour and Lord. Their sins thus remain unforgiven so far, and unless things change there awaits for them that eventual, awesome scene before the "great white throne" (John 6.37; 14.6 / I Timothy 2.3-6 / Hebrews 10.31 / Revelation 20.11-15).

We thus believe from Scripture that Jesus will next come to seize away His own, followed by the 7-year tribulation and His final visible return in glory as Messiah, Lord, Judge and King. In the light of these glorious yet solemn truths, we worship, we watch and we witness, for, with the way things are going in the world, the seizing-away can surely be not long delayed.

Meanwhile, may we all have a blessed “Nativity of our Lord”, while bearing in mind that Jesus is very far from being a Baby now!

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