

11/27/2005

ADVENT I

MARK 13:24-37, YEAR B

Today, we begin again our journey through the year with Jesus: Advent Season has arrived. Some who began this journey with us last year are no longer in this life. At journey's end next year, some of us who begin it together today may not be in this life. What of those no longer with us; what of us should we be taken?

Advent calls us to consider this question and to claim the opportunity to re-order our lives for a good answer. For, as we have just heard Jesus testify, he *is* coming again and, when he comes, he will gather to him his elect. Watch therefore, he says; prepare. How prepare? Let me weave for you a parable.

Like most of us, Roger Taylor was a rather ordinary person, nothing very glorious or tragic ever happening to him. The years accumulated, unnoticed by him, till, one day, something unexpected and disturbing occurred: Roger died.

He found himself standing all alone in the midst of a great void, suspended, as it were, in an empty expanse, which was neither dark nor light. Presently he saw a figure in the distance approaching him. A man it was and soon they were face to face. "Hello, Roger," said the man, "Let me introduce myself. I'm Peter."

"The Apostle?" Roger asked. "Correct," Peter replied.

"Well! How DO you do?" Roger gushed, "I must admit I'm not surprised to meet you. But, where are the clouds and mists I expected, and the pearly gates ... and your keys?"

"Oh," Peter laughed, "I'm afraid you're another one who has taken some of our symbols a bit too literally. I've met others who expected angels to fly down to taxi them away to the accompaniment of Anglican double-chant. One of these was once your priest. Do you remember him? A winsome fellow by the name of Father David Houk. But, for the time being, this is all you get to see. You're not home yet. I've come to take you to the Lord for judgment."

"Judgment!" Roger exclaimed. "Well, I expected I'd have to face it someday. I just didn't realize it would come so soon!"

"I know," Peter commiserated, "It's a common mistake we humans make, putting out of mind death's inevitability and our need to prepare for it, surprised when it overtakes us. But really, Roger, your death and judgment are not so soon. You've lived a number of years, been exposed to the Gospel, been active in the Church, so there isn't any reason to postpone things, is there?"

"I suppose not," Roger said disconcertedly. Peter turned to go and Roger moved alongside him. "Excuse me," he said, "but I'm naturally curious about this judgment business. I suppose the Lord will have the book there."

"Book? What book?" Peter queried. "THE BOOK," Roger responded, "Everybody knows about THAT book."

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're referring to," Peter replied, "Tell me about this book."

Incredulous, Roger began, "Well, I've always thought of it like this. The Lord has this book in which is recorded every deed of my life. He'll read to me from it. He'll know that I always hated my younger brother who I'm sure was favored by my parents, and that I did some things to him

over the years to get even. That was wrong. But he'll also know that I loved my sister and did a lot for her and her family after her husband deserted her. There *is* the matter of that affair I had, and some other dalliances, which I still like to think about now and then. But I don't see what's wrong with a few daydreams. Anyway, I've basically been faithful for the past twenty years, so I ought to come out ahead on that score. Besides, I should get a lot of credit for being a church member who was relatively active, shouldn't I? Oh, I know I wasn't the best, but I was a member of the best; you know, the Anglican Church, at St Matthias in Dallas."

Peter could not suppress a smile, though his eyes were quite serious. "Roger," he said, carefully measuring his words, "I can certainly understand your concept of judgment, since it is the natural way of that fallen world you and I were part of, a world which is always measuring and balancing. But the Lord is not an accountant, sitting in judgment with a ledger on his knees, balancing debits against credits. He doesn't dispatch you to heaven or hell because one side outweighs the other by a slight margin. How do you think I could have become one of heaven's citizens if the Lord were a mathematician? Remember, I denied him ... HIM, Roger! ... not once, but three times, at his hour of greatest need. But the Lord doesn't judge that way, Roger. There is NO book."

"No book," repeated Roger weakly. "Then how does he judge? Uh-oh, I've got it. There's a trial. That's it! You're taking me to court ... Satan's the prosecutor and he's going to do everything in his power to convict me!"

A shudder shook Roger as he thought of that most cunning and deceptive of all accusers, but he made himself go on, questioning, "There will be someone to conduct my defense, won't there? Perhaps you ... Will you do it, will you plead my case and win an acquittal for me from the Lord? Please do this for me."

"Oh, Roger," Peter replied empathetically, "You don't seem to have learned much about God, and sin, and us humans in your years in the Church. The trial is over. You, I, the whole human race were judged guilty eons ago when our father Adam and our mother Eve turned their backs on God and sent their infection spiritually into every one of us. But then came our pardon when Jesus offered himself on the cross as sacrifice for our sins and injected the strong antidote of his grace into us. You see, as far as a trial is concerned, it's over. You're acquitted."

"I am?!" cried Roger joyfully. "Why, that's wonderful! Then my judgment has already been settled. Why did you play with me and not tell me until now that I'm on my way to heaven?"

"Not quite," Peter answered sternly, and the smile quickly fled from Roger's face. "This is where the trial analogy ends, and we go on. The Lord wants to see your reaction to your acquittal, how you responded to and embraced the redemption he won for you through his shredding on the cross. Did you really accept it, or not?"

By now, Roger was trembling, torn between asking the question in his mind and fearing the answer. Haltingly, he asked, "Then what is the judgment, St Peter; how does it occur?"

"It is simply this," Peter replied quietly. "You are going to stand before the Lord, and he will look at you."

"Look at me?" Roger questioned, "Just look at me?"

"That is all," said Peter. "Just look *at* you ... look *into* you ... look *through* you. Just by looking,

he will know you and he will know to whom you belong.”

Roger’s legs locked and he could not move on. In a whisper he asked, “What does Jesus want to see?”

Peter’s response was equally soft. “He wants to see himself, Roger.” Roger’s mouth dropped open, but no words came. He stood there, numb and terrified. Peter went on: “He wants to see himself in you, Roger. Don’t you remember: all us humans created in his image and likeness? We are meant to look like him, in his personality, that is ... to be like him.

“It’s simply a matter of family resemblance. When that resemblance was so severely marred in us by sin, he made it possible for the devastation to be overcome. You were baptized into his life, taken into his Church where his Truth and his Grace reside, both available to you and necessary for your healing. Did you allow that to happen, Roger? Was that the intention of your life? Did you want to be restored to your likeness to God more than anything else?

“Judgment here goes deep beneath the surface of deeds, Roger. Outwardly, a charlatan can do the same works a saint does. So it is not our works which justify us, Roger. It is faith, that is, our growing surrender to the Lord step by step in one area of our lives after another. The Lord will not add up the parts of your life because he doesn’t have to. He will see your life as a whole which is more than the sum of its parts. That is why there are no ledgers or scales here. Just by looking at you, the Lord will know if you are his.”

It was a long time before Roger could speak. When finally he could, he blurted out, “What will he see when he looks at me? What do you see, St Peter?”

“I see only you,” Peter answered. “But don’t let that trouble you. It is only rarely that I can see more than the person I am sent to guide. Most of the time, it is only the Lord who can see himself in another, but he can, even if the likeness is still somewhat blurred and indistinct.”

“And if he sees nothing?” Roger asked.

“Oh, he won’t see nothing,” Peter responded. “If he does not see himself, then he will surely see ‘the other’, the Anti-Lord, and you know whom I mean. And that will decide to whom you belong. You’ve been deciding this throughout your life, Roger.

Now, I leave you here. You have to go the rest of the way by yourself. I suggest you go along in prayer, trying to give yourself up to the Lord, forgetting credits, forgetting debits, forgetting yourself as you were meant to do on earth ... forgetting everything but him, him alone.”

“I’ll try,” said Roger. “But I’m not very good at this, not very practiced. I wish I had started sooner.”

“So do I, Roger,” Peter answered. “So do I.”

*Let us pray. Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armor 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, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*