

Come, Lord Jesus

Advent I

Scripture: Revelation 22:8-13; 16-21

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

If you had a Bible like mine, you would find that the words of Jesus are in red. If you looked at that last chapter of Revelation that was just read, you'd find three red passages. In the vision John hears the voice of Jesus, and three times over Jesus says, "*I am coming soon.*" He did not come soon, of course. It's been now nearly two thousand years. Is it possible really for one to sit on the edge of one's seat, to be, as it were, on tip toe waiting for a rift in the sky and the appearance of the Lord from glory? It is not possible for me to do that. Certainly, in all honesty, we have to say these words – that John at least sensed he was hearing from the Risen One – these words were wrong. For to speak of an imminent return, after two thousand years, is to make nonsense of language.

What then is our Advent hope as we continue our earthly pilgrimage and move toward whatever end may be? What can one yet believe, and what can one put one's heart upon in terms of this Advent hope—this conviction of those immediate followers of Jesus that they must be on the edge of the end, and that very soon their Lord would return? What is it in Advent 1994 that the Church can still hold to? Well, it seems to me that if we can acknowledge that the expectation of an imminent return was wrong, then what we must do is to jettison the form of that hope and expectation, and try to discover the inward essence of what that form pointed to. What we need to do is to try to discover the source, not only of Christian hope, but of the fact that it seems that hope continues to bloom within the human heart against all evidence to the contrary.

Why do we hope? Why do we continue to hope? We cannot believe as they did, as John did, that at any moment our Lord would return. Oh, I know there are those who do. I am amazed over and over and over again at some movement or other announcing the day of the end or still calling Christian people to prepare for the coming of the Lord. I suppose as we come to the end of another millennium there will be even more of that. But in all honesty I cannot say that to you. I believe that that timeline, that calendar of events, simply was the form, which now obviously has been proven wrong in terms of a literal form. But the hope that lives within that form, what is that hope? Is it not simply this: is it not our continual

experience of the disparity between the dream and reality? Is it not that in our experience we constantly come up against that which is so contrary to the dream?

Don't we know that the prophet's dream was true? Don't we know that it could be, and should be that they would not hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain? Don't we long for and believe in the possibility and even in the ultimate reality of the Peaceable Kingdom? Don't we believe what that early church believed that is recorded so vividly in the images of the Book of Revelation: the righting of all wrongs, and the city whose center is coursed through by a river of crystal with trees whose leaves are for the healing of the nation? Don't we know that that is the reality which must be, which ought to be, which should be, which could be? Are we not people of hope because in the disparity between the reality we live and the dream we dream, we refuse to give up the dream? It seems to me that that is the source of that indomitable hope with which we live. So that, even though it seems to me that the calendar, the dating, and all of that has fallen by the wayside through just hard-nosed historical experience, I refuse to give up the dream.

I tried to think, in preparation for this morning, what can one really experience, what can one really believe and hold on this first Sunday in another Advent? A recent experience of mine came to mind as perhaps a parable of what this might be. I wrote of it in the *Courier* recently. Three weeks ago I was in the Netherlands in order to join in the celebration of my old professor and dear friend, Hendrikus Berkhof, in his eightieth year. The celebration was to be on Monday but I was able to go the Saturday before to him in the nursing home and to spend an hour and three-quarters with him—just the two of us. And in intimate connection and intense conversation we spoke of the past and our memories floated through the room . . . his father, his professor, his university days, the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, his having to hide because of his own preaching, his coming in the wake of the Second World War into prominence in the Netherlands with a shaping of that theological posture of the country at that time, calling the Church to faith and renewal, our time together, those four years when we studied together and struggled together and wrestled with questions. We spoke of it all and I, as it were, probed into the treasure of this dear friend of mine, trying to wrest every last bit I could of his wisdom and his understanding, and after an hour and three-quarters I had totally exhausted him. When he moaned a bit, I said, "Henk, put your head down and rest awhile now." He said, "Ja, we must quit."

And I took his hands and I offered a prayer, a Eucharistic prayer. The Greek word *Eucharist* means thanksgiving. It was a Eucharist prayer, thanking God for the time we shared, thanking God for the memories of which we had just spoken – but not only memories – thanking God in those moments that this was not all, this was not an end, that there was something more, something better, that the best was yet to be, and in that moment there was grace, and there was the presence of the One of whom we spoke together. At the end of my prayer which was a bit interspersed with his "Ja . . . Ja . . . Ja," there was his "Amen. Amen."

I left him and I walked the old streets of Leiden, the old haunts, the old University Center, the Roppenberg, the canal that courses through the center, stood on a little hump bridge and listened to the bells in that ancient building of the twelfth century where I had gone to lectures and had my doctoral exam, stood there in the misty, deepening darkness of that Saturday evening and let it wash over me. And as the bells tolled from that old bell tower, I said, "Yes, the bell tolls for him, for me, but that's not all there is."

It has nothing to do with calendars and dates. It has nothing to do with images and models. It has everything to do with the deep intuition, which I believe lives and thrives in the depths of the human being, a deep intuition that it is not the reality, so disparate from the dream, but it is the *dream* that is true, the dream that will not let us go, the dream that continues to be dreamed again and again. And I thought to myself, having been so poignantly aware that maybe this was my last moment with him, that it wouldn't be the last moment at all, but that someday, somewhere, somewhere beyond where we'll have a thousand and a million years in some starred galaxy, that we'll laugh together about our shabby dreams, and our little hopes, and our groundless fears, and the conversation will continue as we probe the inevitable mystery of the good and gracious God.

When I cry from my heart, "Even so, Lord Jesus, come," that's what I mean.