

Second Vespers in Advent

Bulletin

'And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead.'

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The vespers last, we spoke of that Kingdom of God, which can only be understood as Heaven on Earth: the rule of the Lord's word and will through the Holy Christian Church now and unto the life of the world to come through the hands of unworthy pastors to the frail bodies and souls of the baptized, living in this unbelieving world.

This, I charged you: that we should not be deceived by the seeming collapse of Christendom; of the exodus of Christians from the walls of the sanctuary; by the overwhelming victories everywhere attained among the godless against the foolishness-made-wisdom of the faithful; but rather, hearing the Word of the Lord and trusting in His voice alone, embracing His promises, we should hear the paeon of His conquest over every scheme of the devil, and His banner planted in the heart and mind of every forgiven soul.

I charged you: believe not what you see, but what you are told, that *the kingdom of heaven is at hand*, and, indeed, *is already here*.

But, one may ask, this is not what we mean when we think of heaven, we do not think of a light shining faintly in the darkness, a *still small voice*, nor a crippled church staggering along in an ever advancing, secular and dehumanizing world. We want to imagine glory after glory; that which we sing of in the Divine Liturgy, *with angels and archangels and all the company of the heavenly hosts*. We want to hear of those things written of in Daniel, and Ezekiel, strange, disturbing, awesome, and yet comforting; for in such things that defeat our imagination, we realize that our vain imagining cannot begin to grasp the majesty of the Lord.

We want to learn of the world rolled up like a scroll, as spoken of by St. John, with *one like a son of man*, as mighty as bronze and powerful as fire, whose voice is

like the *roaring of many rivers*; a description in which we can hide from the unpleasant, fallen realities of this world.

We want to hear these things, because we are afraid, of an evil world and a painful death, and long to be comforted.

Now, it is the words of a liar to say: 'do not believe your lying eyes.' And yet that is exactly what I have said.

But this for a reason: not because your eyes tell you too much, but because they are not yet able to show you enough. Like newborn children who cannot yet discern the face of their parents seeing only a patchwork of color and shape without association, so we too look upon the surface of the world, but cannot see beyond it, nor should we, for even as John saw behind the veil in his revelation, and so fell as dead; we too cannot touch the ark, lest we be struck down, nor buy the name of the Lord, lest we be judged.

For we, too, are being prepared for something that as yet we should not see, with armies we may not count, with joys we cannot barely comprehend, beneath a Lord we cannot rightly love. Yet in the Hell of this world, in all its fallenness, and through the Purgatory of the Church, in all its wretchedness, even now we are being purified as a sinner and anointed as a priest to enter those indescribable places, that on that day, one greater than me can say instead of 'don't believe what your eyes see,' rather, '*look and see, and I saw.*' And behold....

For now we speak not of the heaven of God's rule, but the heaven of God's presence.

Too often we think of this heaven according to the many beatitudes the blessed will enjoy there: where we *shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore, nor marry, nor be given in marriage, but be like unto the angels*: sinless, having every desire fulfilled, and every suffering alleviated, having brushed away *every tear from our eye*.

Yet though such things accompany the heavenly places, yet they are not heaven itself, for heaven is nothing but God Himself, and our presence before Him, and with Him, and in Him. It is to see Him *face to face*, to witness what Adam was blinded to, to view what Moses was forbidden from, to be surrounded by that which the Prophets could not understand, and suffer that which St. John could not

bear.

It is the Beatific Vision: to *see His glory, full of grace and truth.*

For the promise of the Gospel is not merely a place of painlessness and happiness called heaven. It is not merely a version of the world we know, except debugged and restarted. It is the purpose and end of all creation, which is God Himself, and God alone, the consummation of all creation and the final cause of man, in which *all things in heaven and on earth and below the earth* shall be made complete, shall come to their rest, for they shall find their rest in Him.

For this reason the Fathers write as they do, St. Irenaeus saying that, 'The glory of God is the living man.' and St. Augustine writing that, 'As the life is the flesh of the soul, so the blessed life of man is God.' and St. Bernard of Clairvaux teaches us, 'Blessed are those dwell in You, O God. Here they become holy, there they become secure, in You they are in bliss.'

These things they say because they do not believe Heaven to be a 'where,' or even a 'what,' but a 'who,' so to speak. They know Heaven to be no one else but the Holy Trinity, and the kingdom of Heaven to be our life within Life itself, our victory born of His victory alone. Our joy found in the Love of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *who has set us free to be his people.*

Dear Christian, He is our vision, the Jerusalem toward which we pilgrimage, the Temple in which we receive the love of His sacrifice, the spoils of His victory, and triumph of His war forevermore.

For this we have all prayed, *'deliver us from evil.'* And then He shall. And when we are *in Him and He in us*, we shall *not be afraid.*

For hear, O Israel, the Lord speaks to you:

'Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: 1 Corinthians 2:1-13; Revelation 1:10-18.