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The Second Sunday in Advent

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OUR GOD COMETH

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The mood of Advent is peculiar to itself, a mixture of fear and joy. Of joy, "because thy King cometh unto thee": "Hosanna in the highest!" Of fear, because he goes to the temple, and casts out the moneychangers and vendors who have made the house of prayer a den of thieves. Along with the joy of salvation, there is a note of judgment. The same note of judgment is also found in psalm 50, one of the psalms of Advent, which I propose to examine, with an eye to how judgment brings us to joy. The psalm falls into three parts. In the first part (vv.1-6), the Word comes forth from God to call God's people to judgment. In the second (vv.7-15), the Word corrects a false understanding of worship. In the third (vv.15-23) the Word reproves false practice (hypocrisy) in worship – a defect of will. Yet both parts end with a similar promise of grace – a way for God's people to return to him in worship and enjoy his favour. The Word that comes forth from God in judgment returns to God in grace.

I The Word Comes Forth

The psalm begins with the ringing declaration: "The Lord, even the most mighty God, hath spoken, and called the world, from from the rising up of the sun unto the going down thereof. / Out of Sion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined forth". The Word that comes forth from God and calls the whole world, which shines forth in perfect beauty from Sion: this is the Word that was made flesh, and dwelt among his people. "In these last days hath God spoken unto us by his Son", who is "the brightness of his glory" (Hebrews 1:1, 2). And the shining forth of his glory – the "glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace of truth"; "in perfect beauty" - is "out of Sion": which is both Israel, the locus of revelation, and the Church, its guardian and witness unto the ends of the earth. The beauty of his grace and glory is shown forth in the Church's ministry of Word and Sacrament, and in the lives and doctrine of her saints.

In the third verse, however, the tense of the verbs changes from past to future: from God's past coming in grace to his future coming in judgment: "Our God shall come, and shall not keep silence; There shall go before him a consuming fire, And a mighty tempest shall be stirred up round about him." While the Lord's first Advent in grace is separated in time from his second Advent in judgment, it is unwise to make too much of that separation. It is precisely by our response to

the grace of his first coming that we are judged. "For this is the judgment, that light is come into the world, and men love darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). Thus it is to the recipients of grace, "those that made a covenant with me with sacrifice" in the Church, that the Word of God comes forth in judgment. Thus it is also, that the moment of judgment is not comfortably far off in the vague and indefinite future but now, in the decisions we make in the present: now, in our receiving of his grace. "Now it is high time to awake out of sleep". "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".

But what are Heaven's alarms to

hearts that cower

In willful slumber, deepening every

hour,

That draw their curtains closer

round,

The nearer swells the trumpet's

sound?

Lord, ere our trembling lamps sink

down and die,

Touch us with chastening hand, and

make us feel thee nigh.

Thus John Keble, in *The Christian Year*.

The Church's year begins with a wake-up call, an urgent summons to put aside complacency, cynicism, indifference, despair: Now is the time to heed his judgment, that we may receive at the last his mercy. For as his grace rejected is our judgment; so his judgment received is the grace that cleanses, and purifies, and brings us to peace and joy.

II Judgment of the Faithful (vv.7-15)

In the second part, the Word that has come forth from God testifies against his people, not on account of the outward ceremonies of their sacrificial worship, but for a false understanding of what they mean. He does not benefit from these offerings: "the whole world is mine, and all that is therein". With stinging sarcasm he notes that the materialistic and virtually pagan implications of this notion: "Thinkest thou that I will eat bull's flesh, and drink the blood of goats?" By creation and redemption, all that we have, and all that we are, belong to him of right. What we offer him is not of benefit to him, but to those who offer. What we offer God in worship is always an acknowledgment (in one mode or another) of our entire dependence upon him for his grace, received or hoped for. "Offer unto God thanksgiving, and pay

thy vows unto the Most Highest. / And call upon me in the day of trouble; so will I hear thee, and thou shalt praise me.”

(To be continued)

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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