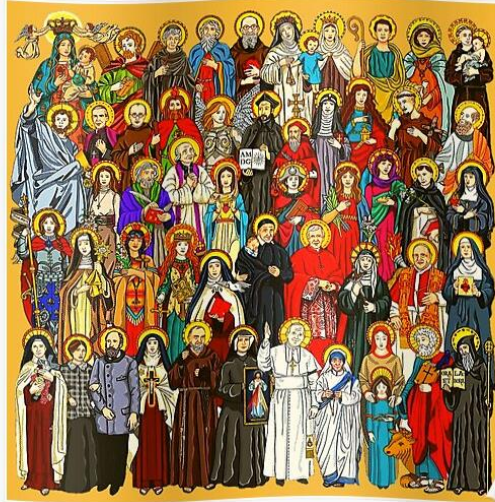


Sermon – November 6, 2022
“The Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, and fill our hearts anew. Anoint these words, making them a transforming blessing that will help conform us to Christ's image and guide us to fruitful labor with Jesus in his mission right here, right now. Amen

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ to each of you on this beautiful All Saints Sunday. We are coming to the end of our year-long journey through the Christian calendar and another year's journey starts on November 27th, the beginning of Advent. Hopefully, we will be able to gather early in the morning on the 27th and witness the rising of the sun on the first day of our new journey together, a new journey through the Christian year. With the rising of the sun on the 27th a new year begins and we will move from celebrating Christ the King to anticipating the arrival of God in the flesh as Jesus. Once again, we will anticipate the arrival of the Christ child, the savior of the world, as an infant wrapped in cloth and placed in a manger.

Today is the day in the life of the church when we take time to celebrate the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us, those who have died in the faith and whom we expect to see return with Jesus when he comes again in power. Hopefully, you were able to find a name or

names of those who were saints in your own lives and in the lives of this church and have honored their lives today by wearing their name tag. Remember that those who have put on Christ in death will also be resurrected with him into life eternal.

Today we heard part of the second letter from Paul to the church at Thessalonica. These are not personal letters from Paul to Timothy, Titus, or an elder of the church. These letters were to be read before the body of the church as they addressed issues the gathered body was struggling with and Paul was seeking to address. The section of the letter we read this morning gives us insight that part of the struggle is centered around the coming or final return of Jesus Christ in power. Paul has become aware that the church at Thessalonica is not focused on what he taught them when he was with them, but on teaching they have encountered since he left. We are not able to understand from the letters we have access to today the source of the teaching, nor its detailed content. We are able to realize that the material and issues discussed in the letter are well known to Paul and the church in Thessalonica, but we are missing the details of those communications. We are left to focus on what we do know and can find in the text we have and must leave the more detailed exchange we are missing alone.

From Paul's letter, we can identify several items that will help us define this issue. First, there is a day, the last day or that day, when the Lord Jesus will return in power. No matter the teaching we encounter in our time that tries to teach otherwise; that day has not yet come. It is a date in the future, known only to God, the day when Jesus Christ, accompanied by those who have died in faith, will return in power to judge the living and the dead. We know Jesus' return has not occurred as Paul teaches there are firm, readily observable events that must take place prior to Christ's return. Paul identifies two events, a general rebellion against God and the revealing of the lawless one who is destined for destruction. Part of Paul's point is that these events will be observable and will not occur in some distant hidden corner of the world, but will be known or revealed to all. There will be no speculation as to whether Christ has returned, as the events leading up to the return and the return of Christ will not be isolated events. All will be aware of them. Even though Paul gives us this guidance, there has been and continues to be speculation about the details of the precursor events. The holy place in the temple in Jerusalem has been entered several times over the centuries by men who became candidates for the role of lawless one in their time. In the third century BCE, we find Antiochus entering the holy place. In the first century BCE, Pompey enters, and in CE 41, the Roman emperor Caligula enters into this

holy place. For the Jews, these men were all candidates for the lawless one, but as Paul continues to teach, none of these candidates was the lawless one. Paul's last point on the subject to the Thessalonians is that while he was with them, he taught them about the last day and the coming of Christ. The last day is a time we also are to look forward to with great anticipation. It is the day when our faith will be sight, a time when we will witness the glorious return of our King and the completion of the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. It is a day when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Like these Thessalonians, we are not to speculate about the time of this day's coming or to be swayed that the last day has come and we somehow missed it. As believers in Jesus and those who also have been taught, we are not to be those who speculate about the time of the coming of Christ, but are to be those who are at work in the now of our lives to bring souls into this coming kingdom. We are to be those who are found at work by our Master when he comes.

As Paul encouraged the Thessalonians, we are not to be swayed, but are to trust in what we have been taught through the word of God, to trust Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth, and we are to be those who are at work in our time with Jesus in his mission to all people. Paul has taught that we are to anticipate that before that day comes, we who believe in Jesus will face persecution, persecution that ends only with the coming of Jesus. Too much has been written about the possible times of Jesus' return and events that may or may not be connected with that day. When we awake each day, we are to thank Jesus for another day to be at work in his kingdom, pray for those who are being persecuted, and get on with the work that we have been given for that day. Our task is not to seek to know that which we have not been given to know, but to be at work in the kingdom focused on the task of each day so that we might be part of bringing the full number into the kingdom of God.

As there has been and continues to be much speculation about dates, signs, and events that precede the coming of Christ, there also has been and will continue to be much speculation about the identity of the lawless one. In our culture, the lawless one is called the Antichrist, literally the one who opposes and is opposite to Christ. One writer on this topic pointed out that in every generation there must be at least one who could be the man of lawlessness who seeks to put himself in the place of God. In some generations, no doubt, there are many such candidates as the devil does not know when Jesus will come and has to always be prepared. One of the commentary writers I read gave a long list of examples of potential antichrists that have been

identified over the years. Let me read that list to us this morning. “The record of attempts to determine the identity of Antichrist is a long one, stretching back well over a millennium and a half. Likewise, the list of those confidently identified as Antichrist is a long one. It includes various Roman emperors, the leader of the Vandal invaders who sacked Rome, Mohammed, various popes, the papacy itself, Emperor Frederick II and Pope Gregory IX (each of whom viewed the other as the Antichrist), Martin Luther, King George II of England, Napoleon Bonaparte, Napoleon III, each side in the American Civil War, Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, the League of Nations, Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, the United Nations, Khrushchev, the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev (the birth mark on his forehead allegedly being the mark of the beast), King Juan Carlos of Spain, Pope John Paul II, Anwar Sadat, the Ayatollah Khomeini, Yasser Arafat, Saddam Hussein, the New Age Movement, theologian Matthew Fox, Henry Kissinger, and former presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Wilson Reagan (six letters in each name = 666 [cf. Rev. 13:18], and Reagan recovered from a serious wound).”ⁱ The list is long and grows often as people speculate on who the antichrist might be.

Too often during seasons of political campaigns in the United States, we will encounter new suggestions as several of these examples point out. The point that Paul makes in his time and is still true today is for us to not waste time on speculation, but focus all of our time and attention on the one whom we know wins—Jesus. Paul, in his reminder in the letter, upon mentioning the lawless one, immediately follows his words with the statement that the lawless one is “the one destined for destruction.”ⁱⁱ In the end, Jesus wins. Our task is not to speculate on who the lawless one is and when that day will come, but to learn who Jesus is, seek to be like him, and to be found working with him in God’s inbreaking kingdom.

Let me make a final point from a plain reading of this morning’s text. The text does not support the idea that we as believers in Jesus will be removed from the tribulation that precedes the last day and return after it is over. Such an idea is not part of the teaching that Paul leaves or is found in the Gospels. What Jesus taught his disciples was that they will face persecution, they will be in the midst of the tribulation, and they will be sustained by the presence and strength of Jesus. We as believers are to be those who know Jesus and are at work in his mission until he returns. Our anticipation should be of a coming time of persecution for believers and, in response, we should seek to grow our reliance on Jesus to sustain us until he comes again in power. Paul tells the believers in Thessalonica they are to be those who stand firm in the word of

God and hold fast to the traditions taught by the apostles. Fundamental in this teaching is that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life, shed his blood for us on the cross, died for our sins, was resurrected, and ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father, from where he will come again in power. This teaching applies to believers today. The teaching of the apostles is summarized in the creeds of the Church, found in the word of God that we have been given, and upheld in the traditions of the Church. The apostolic teaching is what the church has taught and held as true for 2000+ years. We are to stand firm in the word and these traditions as we receive love from God and our Lord Jesus who gives us grace for life, hope in difficult days, and the sure promise of eternal comfort. It is through good works, godly works, righteous works, and the word of God that we are strengthened for such a time as today and for the days to come. Don't get sidetracked on when Jesus will return. Be assured that he has not, and focus on learning from the word we have been given who Jesus Christ is and seeking through good works to be strengthened in our love of each other. Today we celebrate all of the saints who have gone before, who form a great cloud of witnesses in our lives, and from whom we also are to recall the love of Jesus they shared with us and to allow that love to encourage us for the work we have been given. We are to be those who are prepared for persecution, and when it comes, we are to turn our eyes to Jesus. Let's close with that reminder. Sing with me the familiar song by Helen H. Lemmel, "Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus."

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.ⁱⁱⁱ

Pray with me: Jesus, help us to be those who are always looking for your glorious return as we stand firm in the traditions we have been given and seek to strengthen others through works of love that sustain us and others now and always. Jesus, we give thanks for those who have gone before us and shared with us those clear expressions of your love. Give us hearts to love others as they loved us. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ Holmes, Michael W.. 1 and 2 Thessalonians: The NIV Application Commentary from Biblical Text to Contemporary Life (p. 233). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ NRSV 2 Thessalonians 2:3

ⁱⁱⁱ Holmes, Michael W.. 1 and 2 Thessalonians: The NIV Application Commentary from Biblical Text to Contemporary Life (p. 236). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.