

## Advent 1 (2024)

Twenty-three years after it happened, 9/11 remains etched in the memory of those who were alive at the time.

By all accounts, it began as an ordinary day.

Matt Laur and Katie Couric were doing their routine on the Today Show.

Commuters were rushing to catch their trains.

Business deals were being contemplated.

Mothers were getting their children up and off to school.

People were heading for airports and boarding planes.

A perfect autumn day in the city with clear skies and lots of people on the streets.

Then, in the twinkling of an eye, everything changed. The world as we knew it evaporated before our eyes.

Those iconic buildings symbolizing America's power and prestige came down, one floor upon another.

Well, something like this happened when Jesus came the first time. History turned a corner. The world would never be the same.

Oh yes, what happened was not a complete surprise. In some sense it was 'long expected.'

Abraham's physical offspring looked for the arrival of a King out of David's royal line. And Jesus had been going throughout Palestine doing some rather remarkable things which suggested He might just be that one.

Nevertheless, I suspect many went about their business during this period as they always had.

People got married and had children.

Taxes were levied and had to be paid.

Financial deals were conceived and consummated.

The priests went about their daily routine in the Temple offering animal sacrifices.

Those who sold the animals used for these sacrifices plied their trade in the outer court of the Temple, as did those who changed pagan money into coinage acceptable for paying the Temple tax.

Jokes were exchanged and news passed.

Life, in spite of political rumblings, seemed fairly predictable and secure.

Then Jesus shows up riding on a donkey and enters the Holy City.

To us this might not seem unremarkable, but to the Jews who knew their Hebrew scriptures it was revolutionary.

It was an open declaration that He was the Messiah, the One appointed to bring in God's new day, not just for Israel, but for the world. The secret that had been concealed was revealed.

The script Jesus followed was laid out 500 years earlier by the prophet Zechariah. This prophecy is found in Zechariah 9:9:

**“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having**

**salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass” (9:9).**

And the people got it! In response those lining the roadway shouted something on the order of “God save the King.”

Jesus then goes to the Temple in fulfillment of another prophecy, this one found in Malachi 3:1: **“The Lord, whom you seek, shall suddenly come to His temple . . .”**

There He overturns the tables of those who practiced their unholy trade in the court of God’s House.

What this action suggested was that the Temple itself was under judgment.

And if you know your history, you know this judgment was completed in A.D. 70 when the armies of Rome laid that whole edifice even to the ground.

The destruction of the Temple in the first century was something on the order of the Twin Towers coming crashing down in the twenty first. It put a line down through history.

Because of this cataclysmic event, the world was a different place, not least because since that time no sacrifices have been offered.

As Christians, we understand that Jesus' death on the cross made those sacrifices redundant.

These former sacrifices were signposts pointing ahead to the only sacrifice that could in fact take away the sin of the world and bridge the gap between God and man.

Jesus, as we understand it, was both the true Temple (the place earth and heaven overlapped) and the true sacrifice, the Lamb without blemish.

But, for those who did NOT embrace Jesus as messiah, the loss of the Temple represented a sea-surge change in their approach to religion.

Adjusting to new realities, temple ritual was replaced with the study of Torah in rabbinic Judaism (the Judaism still being practiced today).

Such was what happened when Jesus came.

He came in fulfilment of prophecy and parted the waters of history. Down to this very day we reckon history in terms of BC – before Christ – and AD, *Anno Domini* (in the year of our Lord).

On this Sunday – the First Sunday in Advent – we look back on our Lord's coming 2000 years ago. We give thanks for all that was achieved at that coming. But we also look forward to His Second Coming. He who came, comes.

This time it will not be to deal with sin in the sense that further atonement needs to be made. No Jesus paid it all, once and for all.

The deal is done. All you and I have to do is to receive the free gift . . . to turn from darkness to light. Have you done this? If not, why not today? The Saviour is waiting with arms outstretched to receive you. ///

What then is the reason for Jesus' Second Coming?

Well, it is to finish the work He began when He came the first time . . . to openly acknowledge those who are His . . . to expose falsehood and wrong . . . to judge the living and the dead . . . bring about the abolition of death . . . renew and restore creation.

But what about the time in between? What about now?



Our Epistle helps us formulate an answer to this question.

In this passage from the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul tells us love should be the theme in this in-between period. **“Owe no man any thing, but to love one another,”** he writes.

Owing other people money is a dubious thing. It can lead to dissension and loss of friendship, especially if one is not able to pay the debt back in a timely manner, but love is different.

We can never zero out the account of love. God so love us that He gave us nothing short of Himself in the person of His Son Jesus. In response, we are to love one another. His love drives our love.

This love is more than a feeling. It is active, doing and costly.

During the Second World War, Madame Chiang Kai-shek, wife of the Chinese ruler, visited the White House with 40 servants and aides and stayed for nine days.

After she left, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt remarked: **“Madame Chiang Kai-shek talks a lot about democracy but hasn’t a clue how live in one.”**

Something similar can be said of some Christians. They talk a lot about love but that is all they do. It’s all in their heads. They never get on with practicing it in actual situations.

Maybe that is something you and I can work on in this season of Advent, getting our hand dirty for the sake of the Gospel, practicing real love to real people out there on the streets.

Today’s Epistle further reminds us that the call to love and serve is an urgent one.

What makes it urgent is the nearness of our personal encounter with God. Christ comes at the end of the age, but He also comes – at least for the believer – at his death.

So, we must prepare. We must cast away the the garbage in our lives (and we all have some) and focus on what is real, true and lasting.

9/11 came swiftly and without warning.

Our Lord's first coming and the events that followed in A.D. 70 caught many off guard

It must not be so with us.

This rented field in which we make our home may be very lovely. We should certainly enjoy it and thank God for it, but we dare not sink our tent pegs too deeply into its soil.

We dare not make what is transient ultimate.

Rather, we are to make each day count . . . to spend and be spent in Christ's service . . . to live each day as if it were our last . . . to keep one eye on the furrow we are ploughing, the other on the eastern sky . . . to be joyful and expectant . . . to be witnesses.

In closing, I like the way J.B. Phillips translates, or rather paraphrases, the last verse of today's Epistle: **“Let us be Christ's men [people] from head to foot.”**

What a delightful phrase! May it be our watchword as we head into Advent and onward to Christmas.

