And the Lord Shall Descend

November 12th, 2017

23rd Sunday after Pentecost

*And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight, The clouds be rolled back as a scroll; The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend, Even so, it is well with my soul.* These are the words of Horatio G. Spafford, a Chicago lawyer and businessman. In 1871, Spafford lost his son to pneumonia and most of his business in the Great Chicago Fire. Only two years later, his wife and four daughters were on a French ocean liner, the *Ville du Havre*, which sank after colliding with the Scottish iron-hulled ship *Loch Earn.* Only his wife survived. It is said that Spafford wrote the words to this hymn when sailing to Cardiff to meet his wife and that the words came to him when his own ship passed the place in the Atlantic where he lost his four daughters (http://staugustine.com/living/religion/2014-10-16/story-behind-song-it-well-my-soul). The link between the *Parousia,* or Second Coming of Christ that we read of in 1 Thessalonians and searching for healing in tragedy might seem like a stretch. The kind of faith that says, "Even so, it is well with my soul" might seem utterly impractical or incongruent with the demands and sentiments of the postmodern age. Nevertheless, almost 1900 years had passed between Paul's letter to the Thessalonians and the tragedy experienced by the Spaffords. The image of Christ returning brought comfort to Horatio Spafford, and it irrevocably transformed his life. While there will be a great diversity of views on how to read this scripture, the apostle Paul himself enjoins: "Therefore encourage one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18). Thus, these are not words that are simply for our personal comfort on dark and stormy nights. These are words that are meant to encourage others and build our sense of community; we are, in short, a community of vigilance and expectation that waits for Christ to return.

The second coming of Christ is one of the pictures of Jesus that the New Testament gives to us to contemplate. It is inescapably present in the Gospels and in the letters of Paul. Imagine what your faith would look like without the resurrection and the second coming. Immediately, we would lose a considerable amount of other aspects to our faith. First, we would have to cut out a fair number of the sayings of Jesus: "For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. (Matthew 24:4-5; 11; 23-27); "At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other" (Matthew 24:30-31); "For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done" ((Matthew 16:27); "Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:34-36)"—and at least about eleven other references. Eleven parables would have to be jettisoned, as well (Parable of the Faithful Servant, the Ten Virgins, the Great Banquet, the Rich Fool, the Wicked Husbandmen, the Tares, the Net, the Budding Fig Tree, the Barren Fig Tree, and the Talents). Essentially, we could extend this to the whole Bible. Certain words from Christ would cease to make sense, as when he says: "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5); or, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:18); and again, "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Thus, without this image of Christ coming again, we are left in an impoverished wasteland (T.S. Eliot, "The Wasteland"; cf. also "The Hollow Men"); we are Vladimir and Estragon waiting for Godot who never shows up (Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*). Our Scripture would then need only three books—Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and the Book of Job. Actually, we would not need even those books. They still have traces of hope in them. The world of such a faith is dark indeed. This is a world where Sherlock Holmes can figure out half of the puzzle on a good day. Fra Angelico can finish the underpainting and background, but never the final forms and faces—there is no *Sacred Conversation* in its perfect form. Every novel has no ending; every heartbreak remains unhealed. This is the world where the victims of cruelty, violence, despotism and injustice remain abandoned and forgotten, the rapist and murderer goes unpunished, the corrupt politician forever walks free, the earth deteriorates until all life is extinct on its surface, the planets are left to their pointless orbits until the sun runs out of hydrogen and the last stars fade from the sky. What kind of loving God would create such a world and leave it to its own futility and extinction?

Spiritually and rhetorically, the apocalyptic language of the New Testament serves a multitude of functions. It comforts those who fear the fate of this world and their own ultimate destination. It reassures them about the nature of death, salvation and the afterlife. Thus Paul says:   
"We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died" (1 Thessalonians 4:13-15). There really is no Christian theodicy without the resurrection and the second coming. Without them, we have a theodicy of wishful thinking or living in pious denial. Secondly, the apocalyptic language of the New Testament teaches us to be humble; it curbs our arrogance and narcissism by reminding us that there is a judge in heaven who watches, and that everything we do has import and consequence, for good or for evil. This is why Jesus says, "Will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry out to Him day and night? Will He continue to defer their help? I tell you, He will promptly carry out justice on their behalf. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:7-8). Jesus constantly enjoins the vigilance of faith. Even in the garden of Gethsemane, before he went to the Cross, Jesus told the disciples to "watch and pray" (Matthew 26:41). And logically speaking, the Lord's return protects our sanity. It is the absolute guarantee that cause and effect have meaning; it is the guarantee that the cost of following Jesus (Matthew 10) is worthwhile and outweighed by the outpouring of God's grace, and that Jesus is to be trusted and believed because he means what he says about redemption. Moreover, it means that our faith is not a lie—there is a supreme good that we are rationally drawn to follow, as Immanuel Kant once argued. One can take the moral argument for God's existence a step further, though. Without a supreme good, there is no rationality, much less an afterlife or a good consequence for goodness. To abandon rationality is to plunge into the deepest of lies, the deepest of darknesses, to reject life itself. When Christ comes again, the fullness of God, the supreme good, the *summum bonum,* the ultimate felicity, will be completely revealed and we shall see face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12). The greatest, deepest, innermost prayer of our souls will be answered.

In the final chapter of C.S. Lewis's book *The Last Battle,* we read of how the main characters move from their earthly existence into a heavenly one: “Farewell to Shadowlands” is the title of the last chapter of the book *The Last Battle*, the last book in *The Chronicles of Narnia* series.  On the last page, C. S. Lewis writes: "'There was  a real railway accident,' said Aslan softly. 'Your father and mother and all of you are–as you used to call it in the Shadowlands–dead.  The term is over:  the holidays have begun.  The dream is ended:  this is the morning.' And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them.  And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after.  But for them it was only the beginning of the real story.  All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page:  now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read:  which goes on forever:  in which every chapter is better than the one before.” (C. S. Lewis, The Last Battle (HarperCollins: New York, 1956. p. 228.) Naturally, this echoes what we read in the Book of Revelation: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.' (Revelation 21:1-5) These words are trustworthy and true. Expecting Jesus is expecting truth.

The return of the Lord, though it has not happened yet, has already shaped history in many positive ways. It empowers the faithful to give their lives to God without hesitation, without fear. It reminds them of a higher purpose in their lives. Granted, there have been many who have swerved from Scripture and have invented paranoid apocalyptic fantasies, causing great harm—there will always be heresies, controversies, and wolves in sheep's clothing. That is the nature of anything good on this mortal plane, and thankfully the coming of Jesus again is what prevents us from caving into despair over the wormholes these events and phenomena chew through every good effort in history. Nevertheless, it is the hope and expectation of Christ coming again that has often inspired the greatest selflessness, the greatest charity, the greatest changes in our history.

Not long after Horatio Spafford crossed the Atlantic and wrote those words, he and his wife did something remarkable, something that links our faith and trust in the future coming of Jesus to what we undertake now in the present. The Spaffords came to see themselves as "religious outsiders": "They left their Presbyterian congregation and held faith-based prayer meetings in their own home. Their Messianic sect was dubbed 'the Overcomers' by American press. In August 1881, the Spaffords set out for Jerusalem as a party of thirteen adults and three children and set up the American Colony. Colony members, later joined by Swedish Christians, engaged in philanthropic work amongst the people of Jerusalem regardless of their religious affiliation and without proselytizing motives—thereby gaining the trust of the local Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities. During and immediately after World War I, the American Colony played a critical role in supporting these communities through the great suffering and deprivations of the Eastern front by running soup kitchens, hospitals, orphanages and other charitable ventures. In Jerusalem Horatio and Anna Spafford adopted teenager Jacob Eliahu, then Jacob Spafford (1864–1932), born in Ramallah into a Turkish Jewish family, who as a schoolboy, discovered by chance the Siloam inscription" (Wikipedia, s.v. Horatio Spafford). The Siloam inscription, incidentally, is an archaeological artifact that corroborates the Old Testament stories of how Hezekiah built a conduit for water in Jerusalem (2 Kings 20:20, 2 Chronicles 32:3-4). It is also one of the oldest specimens of the Paleo-Hebrew alphabet. The American Colony in Jerusalem also played an interesting role in later history: "The 'American Colony,' as it became known, was later joined by Swedish Christians. The society engaged in philanthropic work amongst the people of Jerusalem regardless of religious affiliation, gaining the trust of the local Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities. During and immediately after World War I, the American Colony carried out philanthropic work to alleviate the suffering of the local inhabitants, opening soup kitchens, hospitals, orphanages and other charitable ventures. Although the American Colony ceased to exist as a religious community in the late 1940s, individual members continued to be active in the daily life of Jerusalem. Towards the end of the 1950s, the society's communal residence was converted into the American Colony Hotel. The hotel is an integral part of the Jerusalem landscape where members of all communities in Jerusalem still meet. In 1992 representatives from the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel met in the hotel where they began talks that led to the historic 1993 Oslo Peace Accord" (Wikipedia, s.v. American Colony).

Because of faith in the togetherness of the saints, the communion of saints as some traditions call it, the body of Christ remains whole and continuous, we become an enduring narrative, or in the words of C.S. Lewis, a story "in which every chapter is better than the one before." This is the hope that the apostle Paul imparted to the Thessalonians: "For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever" (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). *And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight, The clouds be rolled back as a scroll; The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend, Even so, it is well with my soul.*