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The Second Sunday of Advent (B)

Last week we implored the Lord, "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down" (Isaiah 63:19)! Today he answers our prayers and he sends among us the "voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord'" (Mark 1:3). The Lord is coming, and he is coming soon.

The one for whom John the Baptist prepared the way is none other than Christ Jesus our Lord, God made man. The Lord Jesus said that "there is none greater than John" born of woman (Luke 7:28). His great honor is to have been given "a grace so great that he was deemed worthy to precede the final Judge of history, and to point him out with his finger."<sup>1</sup>

John used his voice to prepare the way for the coming of the only Son of God who came to speak to his people. If John spoke of the coming Messiah, of what did Jesus speak?

The Psalmist answers our question: "I will hear what God proclaims; the LORD - for he proclaims peace to his people" (Psalm 85:).

At his first coming his voice was quiet, the cry of a tiny infant. At his second coming his voice will not be so quiet.

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Tractate on the Gospel of John* 5.6.2. In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scriptures: New Testament, Vol. II: Mark*. Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, et al, eds. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1998), 3.

Hear what the prophet Isaiah says of his second coming: "Here comes with power the Lord GOD, who rules by his strong arm; here is his reward with him, his recompense before him" (Isaiah 40:10).

If the Lord brings his reward with him, it means that his voice will be the voice of judgment, for no one gives rewards without first making judgments. The word "reward" comes from a Middle English word, *rewarder*, meaning "to take notice of." Of what will the Lord take notice?

On the day when he comes at last, Saint Peter tells us that the Lord Jesus "will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a mighty roar and the elements will be dissolved by fire, and the earth and everything done on it will be found out" (II Peter 3:10). The Lord, then, will take notice of everything that has been done on the earth; he will give his reward based on the way lives were lived. When he gives his reward, he gives his recompense; he will compensate each person for the way they lived, for the way they loved.

That day when he comes will be the day of power and glory, the day of judgment. And because his judgments are "just and true," his voice of judgment is also the voice of peace (Revelation 19:2).

For those who have heard and heeded the voice of John the Baptist, for those who have prepared the way of the Lord in

their lives, the judgment of Christ is not a moment to be feared. It is the very moment of truth, and there is need to fear the truth.

In death a human being emerges into the full light of reality and truth. He takes up that place which is truly his by right. The masquerade of living with its constant retreat behind posturings and fictions, is now over. Man is what he is in truth. Judgment consists in this removal of the mask in death. The judgment is simply the manifestation of the truth.<sup>2</sup>

The judgment of Christ will be based on the basic orientation of our life. Either I have lived a life centered on Christ and desire to be with him forever, or I have lived a life focused on myself and have no real openness for Christ.

As such, his judgment will either be for everlasting life in heaven, or everlasting pain in hell.

Some today suggest that if God truly is a loving God that he would never send a soul to hell, but this is a misunderstanding of what happens in the judgment. God judges and ratifies the decision that we have already made. Those who are judged worthy of heaven have lived lives of faith, hope and love; they have sought to imitate and to serve Christ. Those who are judged as deserving hell are those who have lived only for themselves and have served themselves, taking from life all

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*. Michael Waldstein, trans. (San Francisco, California: Ignatius Press, 1988), 206.

that they could get. We make this fundamental choice in the concrete experiences of life.

If we consider those who have refused to serve Christ and have instead served themselves, Christ "cannot very well grab them by the seat of their pants and pull them kicking and screaming into the Precincts of Joy and Felicity, can he?"<sup>3</sup> Of course not! It is precisely because of his love that he allows us to refuse to serve him; he allows us to choose heaven or hell.

As we use these remaining days of Advent to focus on and prepare for the coming of Christ in glory, we hear again the words of the Baptist: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2)! Now is the time to orient every aspect of our lives toward Christ that he might be at the center of all we say, do and think. We must follow the admonition of Saint Peter: "be eager to be found without spot or blemish before him, at peace" (II Peter 3:14). Let us, then, level the mountains of our pride and fill in the valleys of our greed with humility and trust. Let us make straight the wasteland of our self-centeredness that the peace of Christ may reign in our hearts.

The best way to follow this advice is to seek the Sacrament of Penance that we might be reconciled with the Lord and be able to look into his eyes. Some will say that they have nothing to

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<sup>3</sup> Regis Martin, *The Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven, Hell*. (San Francisco, California: Ignatius Press, 1998), 89.

confess to the Lord; this, then, is the perfect time to go to confession. The more we confess our sins, the more aware of our many sins we become. And the more aware of our sins we are, the more aware we are of the great mercy and love that God has given us in Christ Jesus. And the more aware we are of his merciful love, the better prepared we will be to welcome the Lord at his Second Coming. The better we will also be prepared to celebrate his birth.

If we focus our life so intently on Christ then we will be able to say with Saint Paul, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (cf. Galatians 2:19).