

“CHRIST WILL COME AGAIN”

Romans 11:25-36

25 I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in,
26 and in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written: “The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.
27 And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.”
28 As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies for your sake; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs,
29 for God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable.
30 Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience,
31 so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God’s mercy to you.
32 For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.
33 Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!
34 “Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?”
35 “Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?”
36 For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

Introduction

A woman was doing her last-minute Christmas shopping at a crowded mall. She was tired of fighting the crowds, tired of standing in lines. Patience was wearing thin. Her arms were full of packages when the elevator door opened. It was full. The others in the elevator grudgingly allowed a small space for her and her load. As the doors closed, she blurted out, “Whoever’s responsible for this whole Christmas thing ought to be arrested, strung up, and shot!” Then, from the back of the elevator came a voice: “Don’t worry. They already crucified him.”

“Christ has died; Christ is risen, Christ will come again” is the Advent theme we’ve been preaching. “We proclaim your Death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection, until you come again.” These words are considered to be the oldest surviving liturgy developed for general use in Christian worship. Its date of composition is still disputed, but most scholars propose a fourth-century date.

A contemporary liturgy speaks of a small boy writing a letter to God about the Christmas presents he wanted. “I’ve been good for six months now,” he wrote. After a moment’s reflection, he crossed out “six months” and wrote “three.” After a pause he changed that to “two weeks.” There was another pause and crossing it out.

He got up from the table and went over to the little nativity scene that had the figures of Mary and Joseph. He picked up the figure of Mary and went back to his writing and started again: “Dear God, if ever

you want to see your mother again . . .”

When it comes to Santa Claus or Jesus, please, people, teach your children and grandchildren about God’s grace. It’s not whether “you’ve been bad or good.” Christmas is about Gift, God’s wonderful gift of our Savior/Redeemer. The One who came to buy us back with his life, death and resurrection.

I. Mercy for All (vs. 25-32)

This morning we look at the third mystery of faith in Jesus Christ. “Christ will come again.” What will that be like? How will it all look when God’s sweeping redemptive plan is complete? How will the God of surprises – like the Anointed One, eternal king born in a stable and placed in the Manger, a feeding trough? Like the Messiah Savior nailed to a Cross enduring the pain and shame that should fall upon us? Like a new, fresh grave, the body buried, stone rolled away, he’s not there? – How will the God of surprises surprise us in the end?

The apostle Paul wrestled with this. He was a Hebrew Christian. He held a deep love for his people Israel. And, he had a clear call to preach the Good News to non-Jews. Romans 11 is an extended passage of his hearing from the Holy Spirit and delivering God’s word for the church.

So, Paul writes this: “As far as election is concerned, they (the people of Israel) are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable. Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God’s mercy to you. For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.”

If this is confusing to you, it is confusing. How would anyone figure this out? Apparently, God used the disobedience of the Jewish people to fulfill his promise to bless all nations, all peoples, all ethnic groups, the Gentiles. We who are not Jewish by birth have “received mercy as a result of *their* disobedience! And, “as a result of God’s mercy” toward *us*, “*they too* may now receive mercy.” God’s mercy is offered and available to everyone, “Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female” as Paul wrote in Galatians 3. “For you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:28-29).

II. Stand Back and Praise God (vs.33-36)

Eugene Peterson, who recently passed away, wrote this: “Mystery isn’t what we try when we can’t figure everything out. Mystery is inherent in God’s nature and how God works. Yes, in mystery we’re not in position to control anything or predict outcomes, manage people or pose as authorities.” If this stumps you, it stumped Paul too. It’s a mystery and he stops and praises God! God’s mercy is for all people who by faith in the Messiah will rise from death to life!

John Polkinghorne, now 88 years old, was a theoretical physicist seeking to understand the fundamental nature of matter. He tells of the “experiments in which very fast projectiles were fired at the known particles... the missiles sometimes bounced back, just as if they were hitting something harder and smaller inside the target particles.” These are now called “quarks.” What a great word! Quarks are “any of a number of subatomic particles carrying a fractional electric charge, postulated as building blocks of the hadrons. Quarks have not been directly observed, but theoretical predictions based on their existence have been confirmed experimentally.” Theorized and proven in the 1960s and 70s, quark was awarded the Nobel Prize and is now settled science.

“Yet no one has ever seen an individual quark... We believe in quarks not because we have seen them sitting there on their own, but because that belief makes sense of so much experience that we can observe directly.” Polkinghorne extrapolates that “the same is true of belief in the greatest unseen reality of all – God. No one has seen God directly, but Christian belief makes sense of great swaths of spiritual experience” recorded in the Bible and down the centuries by the witness of the Church. He says, “In this respect, science and religion are quite close to each other.”

In II Corinthians 4, Paul writes this: “We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God... Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (II Cor 4:14-18).

Here in Romans 11, Paul writes, “I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery” this spiritual truth that you can know only by revelation and yet, cannot fully understand. Israel has experienced a hardening in part until “the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved.” As it is written in Isaiah and Jeremiah: “The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.”

Advent is a time to think about the unseen realities lying beneath the surface of life but providing its present foundation and its future hope. How and when Christ will come again is yet unseen. Yet, the Bible presents us with two important truths: that the world and our life in this world are not going to last forever. Science predicts this with great certainty. But, the faithfulness of God and of Jesus the Christ will never come to an end. Science cannot tell us the whole story. The theme of eventual cosmic futility is answered by the theme of the everlasting reliability of God.

Conclusion

My mother passed away last February on her 94th birthday. Glad for the end of her struggle yet sad for the end of her life. I have led services for over a hundred members and friends of our church over the last 18 years. You and I still grieve over the loss of dear loved ones.

“Who’s responsible for this Christmas thing? If you ever want to see your mother again?” That “Christ will come again” is the third part of the *mysterium fide*, the mystery of our faith. The death, resurrection and coming again of Jesus offer the only possible ground for hope of a destiny beyond death either for ourselves on a time scale of tens of years or for the universe on a time scale of billions of years. The only proper human response at the threshold of mystery is kneeling and offering praise. It’s precisely what Paul does. It’s precisely what we should do.

“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ‘Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?’ For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.”