

1<sup>st</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT – C (November 29, 2009)

Fr. Jerry Kopacek

I hope you all had a very happy Thanksgiving with your loved ones; I was able to get up north to see my sisters in Britt and Clear Lake and enjoyed that a lot. And I can truly say “Happy New Year” to you as well since we begin the new church year today with this first Sunday of Advent. Advent is all about preparing ourselves for the coming of the Lord Jesus. Later on we will focus on his birth at Bethlehem as we get closer to Christmas, but for the first two weeks of Advent we look more toward the end of time when Jesus will come in the fullness of his glory—very much related to our celebration of Christ the King last weekend.

Our readings today remind us of Jesus’ second coming—both St. Paul in 1 Thessalonians and Jesus himself in the gospel confirm what we will say in our Creed in a few moments: “He [J] will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.” It will happen; of that there is no doubt...even if there is still so much speculation about when it will happen. Now there is talk about the year 2012 for a variety of reasons; there is even a new movie about it (it has some impressive special effects, but that’s about all). We just need to remember Jesus’ words that are as relevant as ever: “no one knows except the Father”. Do you remember all the hype about the year 2000 and Y2K and how all the computers were supposed to break down? Well, here we are nearly ten years later, and the computers are still working (at least most of the time).

There is another aspect of Jesus’ second coming at the end of time that does not seem to get as much attention but is also very important for us in particular: our belief that at that end-time, our bodies will be raised from the dead—body and soul will be reunited for each one of us and everyone else who has ever lived and who will live. This is also a definite part of our faith, part of Catholic dogma. It is affirmed both in the Nicene Creed (“We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come”) and the Apostles’ Creed with its statement of belief in “the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting”. We run through those words every so routinely, but let’s take a little time and see what this means, what we can say about ‘the resurrection of the dead’, and how amazing this belief is. In my years as a priest, I have heard many questions about this—from children as well as from adults; e.g. “how can our bodies be raised from the dead if they were destroyed by fire or explosion or if the body was cremated?”

Our Catechism has an excellent treatment of this subject. It clearly affirms our Catholic belief that, “just as Christ is truly risen from the dead and lives forever, so after death the righteous will live forever with the risen Christ and he will raise them up on the last day”, at the end of the world. Not only will the soul live eternally, but our mortal bodies will come to life again. Death is the separation of the soul from the body; the body is reduced to dust and ashes while the soul “goes to meet God, while awaiting its reunion with its glorified body.” Everyone will be raised from the dead; “those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment.”

Belief in the resurrection of all the dead on the last day is a belief that goes back to the very origins of the Church and the Christian faith. In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul put it this way: “if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then...your faith is in vain.” Jesus himself taught this and he tied it to his own rising from the dead: “I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live.” Jesus’ rising from the dead—the Easter event—is in fact the centerpiece of our belief that all will be raised from the dead. Remembering some of the gospel details is crucial here. Jesus was surely risen—his grave was empty, he was seen in the flesh and heard by others after he died on the cross, the wounds in his hands, feet and side were still visible after he was seen alive, he ate a piece of fish in the presence of his astounded apostles. But Jesus’ risen body was different in various ways; his glorified body transcended the limitations of his former bodily

existence. Recall that Mary Magdalen and those two disciples on the road to Emmaus did not recognize the risen Jesus at first; recall also how the risen Jesus was able to join the apostles in the upper room even though its doors were locked due to their fear. We will experience something similar; when we are raised from the dead on the last day, Jesus (in Paul's words) "will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body... For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality."

So how will our bodies and souls be reunited; how will we be raised from the dead—especially regarding those challenging circumstances I mentioned earlier (cremation and so on)? The Catechism says very simply and honestly that we don't know: "This 'how' exceeds our imagination and understanding". But our ignorance, our lack of understanding is hardly a limitation on the power of God to accomplish such a marvelous thing. If God can create the universe and everything in it out of nothing (which he can and which he did—that is also one of our core beliefs), then he can surely accomplish a comparatively simple thing like raising our bodies from the dead and reuniting them with our souls. That leads to the next logical question—what will our risen bodies be like? Again, we cannot know the details but we do know they will be clothed with immortality as St. Paul said. Our risen bodies will no longer be subject to weaknesses, aches or pains, to sickness or disease, to disabilities of any kind; we will no longer have to deal with all those bodily limitations we experience from illness, accidents or the aging process. One particular question does come to my mind—what about gray hair (for those of us who experience that)? I actually kind of hope I get to keep it; I like to think I've earned every one of them....

If you don't have a full grasp or a comprehensive understanding of all this, join the club. But the resurrection of the body is a firm doctrine of our faith; it always has been and it always will be. It tells us also how important our bodies are—as a part of God's creation and of our own existence and identity. We are not merely souls or spirits that are imprisoned and trapped in this flesh-and-blood thing we call a body. Rather, God created us as persons that are both body and soul, each intended to exist to exist and be joined forever. And the fact that God the Son, the second Person of the Most Holy Trinity, took on this bodily existence of ours tells us even more profoundly how important our bodily existence is.

Our Easter faith in Jesus' resurrection is thus connected intimately and necessarily with our Advent faith in his second coming. At that time Jesus will raise our bodies and reunite them each to our souls. In other words, we will thus live in a glorified state akin to Jesus' own and to that of the Blessed Virgin Mary who has already come to that reunion of her body and soul in heaven (that is related to our belief in her Assumption, body and soul, into heaven). For those who have lived for God and served his Son Jesus Christ the best they could, and who repented of their sins and trusted in the mercy of that same God, they will rejoice in heaven in the fullness of their existence—body and soul together—forever. Think for a moment of the greatest joys, the most profound happiness you have ever experienced in this earthly life (wedding day, birth of a child, achieving that goal for which you have been striving for years). Now, realize that those joys, that sheer happiness is less than a drop in the largest ocean compared to the joys of heaven to which we are invited to share in our glorified risen bodies. St. Paul spoke beautifully about this as well: "eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it so much as dawned in the heart of man what God has prepared for those who love him."

Remember our Creed; remember our Advent faith: "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." If that is not a reason to take and live our faith seriously, if that is not a reason to renew our dedication to Jesus Christ and resolve to love and follow him more sincerely, then I don't know what is.