

**DECEMBER 11, 2011 HOMILY
AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH**

“CHRIST WILL COME BACK”

Colossians 3: 4-11

Luke 14: 16-24

Back in the middle of the 1800s Italy was not a unified nation state, and hadn't been for hundreds of years. Some areas were controlled by foreign powers, some areas were ruled by various Italian princes and dukes, and some areas were controlled by the pope in Rome. Many Italians wished to unite all of Italy into one unified nation---but that meant war. The leader of the war for unification was General Garibaldi. Garibaldi was a brave and good man, usually thought of as one of the greatest men of that century. And he led the growing movement and the growing army that fought for unification. His forces moved through the country gradually taking over more and more cities, liberating more and more areas. Those Italians (most of the people of the country) who wanted unification would become very excited when they heard that Garibaldi and his army were drawing near their area. It couldn't be shouted out loud (that might mean getting arrested) but the word would spread from person to person, happily whispered in people's ears, "Garibaldi is coming! Garibaldi is coming!" Those words were scribbled in the dirt of the roads for people to find out the good news---"Garibaldi is coming!" At night, people would secretly paint those words on the walls in cities so everyone would see it the next day before the authorities could paint it over---"Garibaldi is coming!". Those three words excited all Italian patriots---"Garibaldi is coming!" (in "Pulpit Helps", September, 1996, p. 6)

Garibaldi was a great man. But there is a greater, much greater, man coming---Jesus Christ! But didn't He already come 2000 years ago? Isn't that what we're celebrating at Christmas? Yes, He did come 2000 years ago. And He is coming back again.

There's no question about it, no doubt about it. Both of our scripture readings today are about Christ's Second Coming, about the day He comes back. That's one of the themes of this Advent season before Christmas---that Christ who came at Christmas is coming back again. In our epistle lesson today from the Holy Apostle Paul's letter to the Colossians, he writes right at the start of the assigned reading, in chapter 3, verse 4---"*When* Christ who is our life appears...." St. Paul doesn't say "*If* Christ who is our life appears...." He says, "*When* Christ who is our life appears....". No "ifs", no question about it, Christ is coming back.

The fact that He's coming back is talked about all through the Bible. And Christ Himself says more about it than anyone else. In today's gospel lesson from Luke 14, Jesus uses a parable about a great dinner to talk about the day He comes back. The dinner stands for the day of His return to earth. And this fact that He's coming back is also stated clearly by us every Sunday when we recite the Creed as we will in a few minutes. In the Creed we say that we believe that "He shall come again with glory." Not that He might come back or that we hope He'll come back, but "He *shall* come again....".

When will Christ come back to this world? We don't know. Many have tried for many years to predict when it will be. I'm sure you heard about Rev. Harold Campion this year---he twice predicted specific dates when it would happen. First, he gave a date this last spring. Nothing happened. So then he picked a date this last October. Well, here we are....and, again, nothing

happened. But I suppose he sold some books. Jesus said that we can't know when He will return. So we should not try.

The fact that we can't know when the Lord's Second Coming will be means that we should always be ready for it. It could be anytime. Maybe it will be this afternoon---I hope you have a little flexibility in your schedule for the rest of today! Or maybe it will be thousands of years in the future. We don't know. We can't know. We should just be ready at all times.

We need to be ready because once it starts, it's going to happen real fast. There won't be any time left to prepare then. It will start suddenly and be over in a jiffy.

Newspapers have a very large size of type that is rarely used. It's called Second Coming Type. The letters are so big that this type size is reserved for very rare events---like the first landing on the moon----or the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Newspaper people humorously call this huge type size Second Coming Type because that's one of the few things unusual enough to use it for. Well, they'll never get to use it to announce Christ's Second Coming. It will never be used for that because there won't be enough time to set the type. Even though type-setting is now fast because of computerized printing, there still won't be enough time, not even enough time to type the proper words in a computer. Because when Christ returns, it's all going to happen real fast, everything at once---no time to get ready or announce it in a newspaper! No time to even text or tweet.

Since the 1800s, some (not nearly all) of our Protestant friends have believed in a new and modern way of looking at what Christ's Second Coming will be like. Being Orthodox, we don't go with new beliefs so this isn't our belief. But many people hold it and you may hear it on the radio or TV or see it in books. This belief says that Christ will really come back *twice*. The first time He will come back in sort of a secret way and then a few years later He will come back publicly and openly. At that "first Second Coming" Christ will not be visible but will take away all Christians from the world. They will bodily leave the world. They call this idea "the rapture". Don't try to look that word up in the Bible---it's not there! This teaching isn't there either, but by (with good intentions, I think) misunderstanding and misinterpreting various verses in the Bible, this belief evolved in the last 175 years or so.

According to this modern teaching, the people who don't get "raptured" are "left behind" on earth. You may have read or seen the books or movies with that title a few years ago. Because Christ's visible Second Coming is believed by these folks to still be several years away, those left behind will now have a chance to get ready. They weren't ready for the rapture but they have now had a big warning. And now they have a chance to get ready before the real Second Coming of Christ. Remember that this isn't true, it's just a modern invention, but that is what many believe.

In reality, Christ will only come back *once*. And when He comes back it will be very public and visible. That is the clear teaching of the Bible when properly interpreted as by our Orthodox Saints. That's what Jesus Himself taught and He should know, being He's the one coming back! Hear the Lord's words about His return in Matthew 24:30---"Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will *see* the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." That sounds quite public and visible---"with power and great glory"!

Our Church Fathers, of course, agree with the Lord about what it will be like that day. St. Cyril of Jerusalem, who lived 300 years after Christ, wrote about how Christ came quietly to the world the first time, at Christmas. But it won't be quiet when He comes back again. Hear his words---He'll come back "not alone as before but with many, escorted by tens of thousands of angels, nor

secretly.....but shining forth openly as the lightning.” Nothing secret about lightning or tens of thousands of angels! No, there won’t be any secret coming before the real Second Coming. No, no one will get raptured away years before the real end so that those left behind have a warning. That’s only a man-made fairy tale from the 1800s.

So no one will know ahead of time when the end of our world as we know it will happen. It will be a surprise---and it will happen very fast. So we must always be ready. There will be no chance for last-minute changes to be made. You won’t even have time to comb your hair or straighten your tie. St. Paul gives an impression of how fast it will all happen when he writes (specifically of the resurrection of the dead and transformation of the living on that day) in I Corinthians that it will happen in the “twinkling of an eye.” A twinkling is even quicker than a blink! It will be like the buzzer going off at the end of the basketball game. It doesn’t matter if you had a great game-ending play all planned out---if the buzzer goes off before you’re ready, you lose! So be ready.

And if you’re not ready? Well, then get ready without any waiting. Is there some sin you haven’t gotten rid of yet? Get rid of it now. Repent and change now. Get yourself to Confession soon. But someone might say, “Well, I know I have some changes I need to make. But, you know, Lent is such a good time for that kind of thing and it’s only a few months away so I’ll wait until then.” But what if Christ doesn’t wait for Lent and comes back before then? “Whoops” is what you’ll say on that day! Or maybe you’re thinking, “Yes, I need to make some changes and repent of some things. But it will be easier when I get older---I’ll do it down the road a few years.” But what if you don’t get older because Christ comes back soon? Again, “Whoops” is what you’ll then say on that day.

So live each day assuming it’s the last day, that Christ is coming back that day. Once there was a grade school teacher who had to be gone for a long time during the school year. She announced to the children that she didn’t know when she would be back but she would return in the future. And to perk up the children who were sad because they liked her, she announced that when she came back she would bring along a nice prize for whatever child had the cleanest and neatest desk on the day of her return. The next day, one child was talking to the rest about this clean desk contest. Little Mary was known for the messiest desk of all---it was very bad: dirty, stuff hanging out, junk on the floor near the desk. It was so bad the children teased her about it by calling her “Messy Mary”. Messy Mary told the other children---“I want that prize. I’m going to make sure I win this contest.” The other children laughed and said, “How can you win? Your desk is always awful!” Messy Mary replied, “Well, I’m going to give it a good cleaning every Monday.” The children said, “So it will be clean on Monday, but what if the teacher comes back on a Thursday?” Mary thought a little and said, “Okay, I’ll clean it up every morning.” The other children said, “That’s better, but what if she comes back in the afternoon?” Mary thought a moment and said, “I’ll know what I’ll do. I’ll just keep my desk clean all the time!” (in “Our Daily Bread”, 4/15/97).

Don’t plan on getting ready *soon*. Get ready *now* and stay ready all the time. Get ready and stay ready. That’s the advice Jesus Himself gives us in Matthew 24: 42, 44---“Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming...Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour *you do not expect*.” He’ll come back when you don’t expect it. So don’t waste time trying to guess when the Second Coming is. Focus on being ready. Repent, come to Confession, get prepared.

And when you're ready for Him to come back, you'll start having a different attitude towards His return than some do. Many refer to that day in scary tones as "Doomsday". They think of it with only fear and panic. If you're ready, you'll still keep a healthy fear of the judgment you'll receive that day, but you won't be in a panic when you think about that day. You will look forward to it as the day you get to see Jesus Christ face to face....

And even some of what you pray may change. Some people, when they pray about Christ's return, probably pray something like this-----"Please, Lord, don't come back too quick. Some more time, please!" That's not the way our Orthodox spiritual forefathers and foremothers prayed in the early years of our Church. What they prayed was "Maranatha!". That's Aramaic for "Lord, come back!" They didn't pray, "Lord, don't return yet!" but "Lord, come back!". (You'll find this little prayer, left in Aramaic even in English Bibles, several places in the New Testament.)

So get ready. Then make that your prayer---Maranatha! Lord, come back!

And watch the clouds. Keep an eye on the sky. Not for rain or storms, but for Jesus Christ. Because one day you will see Him descending on a cloud back to earth. Until that day, keep praying, "Maranatha! Lord, come back!". And He will!