

DECEMBER 11, 2016

ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

Luke 14: 16-24

“JESUS IS GOING TO WIN”

There was a group of seminary students who loved to play basketball. So they made arrangements to play some evenings at a local school gym. The only other person in the building was a janitor. Much of the time they played, he would be just waiting for them to finish so he could lock up and go home. While he waited he sat on a bleacher and read. And what he almost always read was a Bible. One of the future pastors noticed this and one evening as he was leaving he struck up a conversation with the custodian, asking him what book of the Bible he was studying every evening. The man said he recently had been reading through the book of Revelation---in fact, he had just finished it that evening. The student was a bit surprised as Revelation is often considered a most difficult book. He had been studying it in seminary and, bragging a bit about his own knowledge, he began to tell the janitor about all the various theories and methods of interpretation of the book. He threw out terms such as “preterist”, “historicist”, “pre-millennial”, “post-tribulation”, etc. The custodian replied---“Well, I don’t know anything about those words. I didn’t see any of them in the book.” The student asked, “Do you think you understand the book?” The janitor replied, “Oh, yes, I understand the message of Revelation. The message of the book is that Jesus is going to win.” (“Getting Into Shape Spiritually”, Vernon Grounds, in “Christianity Today”, February 2, 1979, p. 27)

The custodian did understand Revelation well—he had the book’s message right: Jesus is going to win. That’s the message of Revelation, and actually the message of the whole Bible---Jesus is going to win. And His final victory is getting closer each day.

I was recently asked to teach some on our Orthodox beliefs concerning Christ’s Second Coming to our world. Thus, this little 2-week teaching sermon series on the topic, last Sunday and today. It ended up being good timing as we are in the middle of the Advent season, the 40 days before Christmas. During this season we prepare to celebrate Christ’s first coming (first “Advent”) at the first Christmas 2000 years ago. And we also in this season prepare to celebrate, at some unknown date in the future, His second coming (second “Advent”) on the last day.

Last Sunday, we looked at this fact that Christ comes twice. And we saw that both comings are up to God’s timing. And we saw that we can’t know when that Second Coming will be. It will be whenever God wants it to be.

Today we will look some at what happens when that day of the Second Coming arrives. In our gospel reading today from Luke 14, Jesus used a parable to describe that final day. He called it “a great banquet” that will one day be held. And what a great banquet it will indeed be! And we’re all invited! So let’s look at it today....

A brief parenthetical statement before we dig in.....Our Orthodox teachings on this subject are based on what the Bible says about it and on how our Orthodox Saints and Fathers, led by the Holy Spirit, interpret what the Bible says. Some other Christians in

other churches do not agree with some of what I will tell you today. They are good people, and strong believers in God, but due to some misinterpretations of the Bible, they don't agree with all we believe. They do believe, as we do, that Christ is coming back. But they do believe differently on some of the particulars about it. It's interesting to take time to compare the different beliefs, but a sermon doesn't allow that much time, so I will barely mention their beliefs today---just ours! But I'm happy to discuss the differences any time.

As the final day approaches, there will be a time of tribulation. The world has always had trouble, and there have always been persecutions of Christ's Church. But this will be worse. All these troubles will lead to the emergence of the Anti-Christ who will end up ruling the whole world. He will be a very wicked man, a tool of Satan himself. He will at first appear to be good. But once he gets in control, his wickedness will become apparent. And he will attack God's people. We have suffered many persecutions in the last 2000 years but this one will be worse as it will be worldwide. There will be many, many new martyrs; many, many new Saints. But God's Church will endure and survive until the tribulation ends. And it will end because Christ will return and end it very, very quickly.

When He returns will be the day the Bible sometimes calls "the day of the Lord", the day when the world will totally be changed. It won't be a gradual thing, it won't be just a lot of talking about how things can get better. Things will all change instantly. Last week, I closed by reading our Lord's own words about it. Let me read you those same words again, from Matthew 24:29-30----"Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken; 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."

All will change all at once. Now our natural reaction to such verses might be some skepticism. After all, the world just seems to go on forever and ever, century after century. Could it ever really change? Yes, it could. Because the world, the whole universe, is contingent. "Contingent" means it only exists because God made it. And it only continues to exist because God wants it to continue to exist. If God would ever decide it should cease to exist, the whole universe and all of us would be instantly gone. God won't decide that. But He will one day, on that Day of the Lord, totally change the world. Sometimes people call that "the end of the world". Well, it won't actually end, but it will totally be changed.

On that last day, lots of things will happen. Probably pretty much simultaneously..... I will now go quickly through what will happen. But remember, it will pretty much be all at once.....

First--- The general resurrection will happen. When Christ returns, He will open up all the graves, the mausoleums, etc. He will raise up every person who has ever lived.

Perhaps you enjoy visiting cemeteries sometimes---quite, peaceful, pretty places for a stroll. Well, if you happen to be visiting a cemetery on the day of General Resurrection, it won't be peaceful and quiet! It will be a noisy and rambunctious place! Angels blowing trumpets, graves busting open, dead bodies coming back to life! St. Paul describes it in I Corinthians 15:52---"For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable."

Christ Himself arose at Pascha. And on the last day, He will raise up everyone else!

He will raise up those who have fallen asleep in Christ to a new and better and higher level of existence. St. Paul describes it in that same chapter, in I Corinthians 15: 42 & 44----“So it is with the resurrection of the dead.....It is sown a physical body, it will be raised a spiritual body.” “Spiritual body”---strange words the Holy Apostle uses to describe what our new existence will be like after we’re raised up. Is it spiritual? Or is it a body? Well, it seems it’s both. Who knows what it will be like! But we will one day find out.....

Second—What about believers who are still alive when Christ comes back? We don’t when He will return. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe hundreds of years in the future. Let’s say it’s tomorrow, and we’re still living when it happens. What happens to such people? St. Paul again, in that same chapter, tells us-----I Corinthians 15:51-53----“Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep {Paul uses “sleep” to refer here to death.}, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.....this mortal nature must put on immortality.” If we’re still alive at the Second Coming, we won’t have to ever die. God will just change us instantaneously from this level of existence into our new “spiritual bodies”. So while the dead are arising from their graves, we will also be changed.

Third---What happens right after we’re either resurrected or changed? Well, in our new spiritual bodies, we will be in a different phase of existence where at least some “laws of nature” won’t apply to us in the same way anymore. In particular, the law of gravity.

As we rise up out of our graves, the first thing we will see will be Jesus Christ coming to earth on the clouds of heaven. What will be our natural response to seeing Him, our most beloved one? To go right to Him. And being the law of gravity won’t apply to us in our spiritual bodies, that’s exactly what we will do! We will go up to meet Him as He descends. St. Paul describes it in I Thessalonians 4: 16-17----“And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” We will meet Him in the air and then escort Him down. Just like if an important visitor comes to our house, we at least meet him at the door and more likely go out to meet him when he drives up. As we arise from our tombs, we will go to Christ to escort Him to our world.

Fourth---Then the final war, the final battle, will take place. The book of Revelation calls it Armageddon, thus naming it after a famous ancient battlefield in Palestine. In this last war, Christ will go up against Satan, the Antichrist, and all forces of evil.

Is this an important battle? Yes, very much so....and the last war ever.

Will it be a long battle? Will it be something like the 100 Years War in the Middle Ages, or the 30 Years War in the 1600s, or the Vietnam War which seemed to drag on and on?

No, not at all. It will be a very quick war. It will last for about.....oh, one or two seconds. St. Paul describes it in II Thessalonians 2:8----“And then the lawless one will be revealed and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of His mouth.” Jesus won’t need tanks or planes or ships or nuclear weapons. St. Paul says He will defeat all evil “with the breath of His mouth”. He will breath on our ancient enemy, the devil, and the war will be done. That’s why I said it will last one or two seconds, just long enough for Jesus to breath on Satan. And then evil will have been defeated forever and never, never will rise up again.

Fifth---That same final day is Judgment Day. All who have ever lived will appear before God’s throne---the good, the bad, the famous, the unknown, those long buried, those still alive when the final day comes. We will all stand before the Great White Throne to hear our final judgment. St. John saw it in a vision in the book of Revelation and describes it in chapter 20, verse 12---“And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were

opened...and the dead were judged by what was written in the book, by what they had done.”

Read Matthew 25 and you will see who the Judge on the throne that day will be. It will be Jesus Christ. And as Matthew 25 tells us, on that day He will separate the sheep from the goats----the sheep on His right hand will enter the eternal New Heaven and Earth; the goats on His left hand will enter hell.

Sixth----Then God will take this tired old world and change it into something new and better. He will join together forever heaven and earth. Sometimes we speak of the “end of the world”. But it won’t really end; it will be greatly transformed and improved. The biblical books of Isaiah and Revelation call it “the New Heaven and the New Earth”. What will it be like? We know very, very little about that. The Bible and the Saints have given us only a few glimpses of it, but we do know it will be perfect, wonderful, and forever. In true Biblical teaching there is no temporary 1000 year kingdom of Christ that ends in a massive rebellion. That is a misunderstanding of one passage in Revelation 20. Once Christ takes complete charge, His Kingdom will last forever, not a measly 1000 years. One line in the Nicene Creed was put there to specifically state this----that line where we say, “His Kingdom shall have no end.” It’s forever!

St. John in Revelation 21: 1-5 gives us a taste of what that new transformed world will be like---“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them; and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away’. And He who sat upon the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’”

Jesus Christ will wipe away our tears. He will banish forever all pain, sadness, and death. He will make a better world that will last forever. God will be with us, even more so than now.

There is an old saying—“All’s well that ends well.” Yes, it’s all going to end up very well indeed!

In our gospel lesson today from Luke 14, Christ said that one day there will be “a great banquet”. It will be a truly great banquet! And we are all invited! Make getting ready for that banquet the main thing in your life.

And be happy that that final day is always getting closer—the day when Jesus Christ returns. For Jesus is going to win!

