

**The Nativity of the Lord
(Christmas)
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Through four Sundays of Advent we have been putting ourselves in the sandals of Old Testament Jews longing for their Messiah, as we sang songs like “O come, o come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel”; and as we listened to Scriptures like these words from the Prophet Jeremiah:

“The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the House of Israel and Judah.” (Jer. 33:14)

We have also been longing for the Messiah as Christians, listening to Scriptures like these words of St. Paul to the Philippians: “The Lord is near. This is my prayer, that your love may increase, so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.” (Phil. 1); and we've been listening to songs like the one sung by our young people at Lessons and Carols:

“Like a bride waiting for her groom, we'll be a Church ready for you;
every heart longing for our king, we sing,
Even so come, Lord Jesus come; even so come, Lord Jesus come;
even so come, Lord Jesus come.”

Jews and Christians together are waiting for the kingdom we expect from the messiah, a kingdom described in the prayers for the Solemnity of Christ the King as “a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice love and peace, a kingdom that is universal and eternal.

We Christians are used to this joint longing for the Messiah, but Jews who have not yet accepted Jesus as the Messiah (many Jews have, but many have not) point to what they think is a problem for us.

If Jesus was the messiah, and he was born 2,000 years ago, where is that kingdom of justice, love, and peace? Is this a problem for us? Truth be told, many Christians think so.

One could argue from the state of the world that Jesus has had a significant impact, because the world without the gospel is a merciless and savage place, demonstrated by Nazism and Communism, twin ideologies of the 20th century that were both deliberate rejections of Christianity, trying to force a perverted idea of perfection on the human race. Their combined death toll stands at and counting.

In contrast, where Jesus reigns in the hearts of those who believe we do in fact see justice, love, and peace. Butler's lives of the saints bulges at four volumes, and that is just a tiny fraction of all those holy people who have followed Jesus in lives of self-sacrificing love.

So, you could put up a good argument that, thanks to the babe born in Bethlehem, the Kingdom of God is growing among us, that the human race is on its way to perfection, and that we must simply be patient. But this kind of argument is barking up the wrong tree, because Jesus did not come primarily to improve the quality of life in this world. Christianity does have that effect, but if that was the whole point and purpose of the gospel it would be just another world-centered ideology, like Nazism or Communism just much more humane.

Human ideologies promise utopia, a return to the Garden (Eden, that is, take your shoes off, set a spell); but the kingdom of God, what Jesus opens up for us, is not a return to the Garden, to the status quo before the first sin.

In the garden, Adam and Eve were of clay into which God had breathed the breath of life, a metaphor for the physical life of the body that needs to breathe the air. But Jesus, who is the Christ, breathed into his apostles, and into all who believe, the Holy Spirit of supernatural life.

Adam and Eve were free to eat of the trees of the garden, which grew all around them, an idyllic existence. Hungry? Pluck a banana. But they had to eat to live, and the warning about that one tree tells us that the idyllic physical life of the garden was always imperiled by the possibility of evil.

But Jesus, the Christ, the bread of life; came down from heaven to feed us with his own divine life, which strengthens us on our way to that kingdom where evil may not slither.

Adam and Eve were created in the divine image, meaning they could know, and so choose, and so love, with all the natural joys of intimate companionship that love makes possible. Jesus, the Christ, entered into that divine image and filled it with divine reality. When God became man, he made a marriage of mankind with God, so that in Jesus is actualized what the human race has been longing for since the fall-- a kingdom of justice, love, and peace. He does not offer a return to the garden. We are long past that. He who is God and man offers us entry into the life of God Himself.

But our entry cannot be forced. The Son of God, by his incarnation, has opened the door. By faith we approach. By repentance we pass through. By love we rejoice in the great banquet of life that God has prepared for us. So, as we celebrate the birth into this world of Jesus the Messiah, we pray that when it is our time to pass from this world, he will come to take us safely into his kingdom.

And we pray that when it is His time to complete the work begun in Bethlehem by manifesting His glory to the world, his people will be prepared:

“Like a bride waiting for her groom, we'll be a Church ready for you;

every heart longing for our king, we sing,
Even so come, Lord Jesus come; even so come, Lord Jesus come;
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