
Preparing for the Coming of the Lord

1 “Write this letter to the angel of the church in Sardis. This is the message from the one who has the sevenfold Spirit of God and the seven stars:

“I know all the things you do, and that you have a reputation for being alive — but you are dead. 2 Now wake up! [Strengthen what little remains, for even what is left is at the point of death. Your deeds are far from right in the sight of God.] 3 Go back to what you heard and believed at first; hold to it firmly and turn to me again. [Unless you do, I will come upon you suddenly, as unexpected as a thief.]”

4 “Yet even in Sardis there are some who have not soiled their garments with evil deeds. They will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. 5 All who are victorious will be clothed in white. I will never erase their names from the Book of Life, but I will announce before my Father and his angels that they are mine. 6 Anyone who is willing to hear should listen to the Spirit and understand what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” [NLT]

Advent - Jesus is coming, and we are to prepare.

Preparing for a great occasion - it would be interesting to know for how long the TV and other media have been preparing for the death of Nelson Mandela. And now since his death was announced a little more than a week ago, all the result of these preparations were there to be seen: at the main memorial service - and all the services around the country -, for his lying in state, and then for the funeral today. (What do these people do now, when everything is over?)

All these preparations because somebody has died - and many are to remember what he did.

Advent - that is not about preparing to remember Jesus’ life: his birth in the stable, and his life. Advent is not so much about what was - it is more about preparing for what lies ahead. We are called on to

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We have all heard it so often this call to prepare for Christmas. We have been reminded many-a-time that it is not simply about the ‘babe in the manger’. We know and confess that it is about him who is present in our world - but especially Advent is about his great return in power and majesty at the end of time. When that happens, there will not only be 90 heads of state and many thousands of South Africans to witness it - it will be seen be all people who have ever lived.

Jesus is coming - but what does he see when he comes to us? The congregation of which we hear here thought that everything was just right. In Sardis they believed that they were full of the Spirit, but here was the one who has the sevenfold Spirit of God and the seven stars. Where he is not the one to bring life into a church, there may be a lot of activity, but in actual fact such a congregation is like a collection of skeletons - stone-dead!

That may sound like an exaggeration - is that not just another case of trying to make people afraid? But Jesus does not go in for making people afraid where there is no reason. What we are to hear is this: Where Jesus is not at the centre we have lost our way - and have gone seriously astray.

Jesus did not come to earth, so that you could have the opportunity to celebrate Christmas. He was born - and the reason we celebrate Christmas depends on this! - so that he would suffer and die in your stead, and to be raised to new life again. We can have a wonderful Christmas celebration - we can have wonderful services - and still miss out on what it is all about, if he is not at the centre of what we do.

Jesus announces his return - each of these letters to the early church, and to the church throughout the centuries - contains a very clear indication that he will come again. We - not only as a congregation, but each one of us - are to live in expectation of his return. We need this reminder, because we tend to put other things first - what we think is important right now.

We do many things - and often say much - but it is all about this call: Go back to what you heard and believed at first; hold to it firmly and turn to me again.

Are there things which you - which we - have to return to, things we have heard and learnt? We are often so concerned with being accepted by the
people around us - and so we say and do what ‘everybody else’ is doing. We’re “sung to sleep by philosophies that save the trees and kill the children”, as a contemporary Christmas song puts it (While you were sleeping, Casting Crowns). God forbid that we should be known as being ‘behind the times’.

A pastor, Uwe Holmer (UH), who served during the time of the East German regime, writes about something that happened after he had taken part in a TV interview. He was invited to chat around a cup of coffee. He was asked, ‘Is it true that Christians have laws which limit you to one woman?’

UH replied, ‘Yes, the 6th commandment: Do not commit adultery.’... ‘And you believe that’s right?’ UH: ‘Yes.’

‘Do you want to say that you have always had only the one woman.’

UH: ‘Yes.’

‘Where have you been - you really seem out of touch? You don’t fit into this society!’

UH: ‘But my wife is happy, and so am I - and our children even more so!’

On the way back to the hotel when UH was in the car alone with the editor of the show, he asked him, ‘Are you married?’ ‘No’, he replied, but he said that he lived with a woman.

UH asked, ‘Are you happy?’ - ‘No.’

UH: ‘That’s the difference - I’m very happy living by God’s ‘out-of-touch’ commandments, and my family is also. But you have abandoned all of this as being to old-fashioned. You believe that you are free, and are proud of your sense of freedom - but you are unhappy! (Uwe Holmer; Der Mann bei dem Honecker wohnte).

Who determines how you live - the spirit of the times, or the One who has the sevenfold Spirit of God? If we are swayed by what others think and say - about God and how we live - rather than by what the Bible says, we are on the road which ends in death!

That is why the call to us is: **Now wake up!** - get prepared, because there is a wonderful promise for all who turn to Jesus and hold firm to his Word. He says of them, **All who are victorious will be clothed in white. I will never erase their names from the Book of Life, but I will announce before my Father and his angels that they are mine.**

Being clothed in white: the colour of purity and of victory. Jesus came to free us from our idea of being free - because instead of bringing happiness and fulfilment, that road leads to deep unhappiness.

You are to have the victory - that is what he gave you when you became his child. Wake up, be ready - so that you don’t lose what he has given you. Prepare - remove all those things from your life which get between you and the Lord who is coming.

Advent - he is coming. He is coming to your home and to your life - will you let him in?