

Well, we're seven days closer to the inevitable end. I wasn't lying last week when you heard me say that the end is on its way and there's nothing you can do about it, nothing to manipulate it, definitely nothing to stop it, and there's no need to predict it. Just know that, at all times, Christ's return, and life everlasting in paradise, is right around the corner, and officially one whole week closer

At any moment now, creation will cease its groaning, and as one of our children's Bibles puts it, all the sadness will become untrue again. God's people have, forever now, essentially, prayed for this to show its glorious face, as even those anticipating the Messiah's arrival were waiting, trusting that God would show up and act for them at last. And then Paul and John teach us the simplest prayer of hope, Maranatha, Come, our Lord. Come, Lord Jesus.

I think it's very telling, understanding what floods a person's mind when they stop and pray that prayer.

I think the most common response is reunion with loved ones. Wrapping your arms around your mother or father's shoulders after so many years separated by the curse of death. Spending endless time with friends torn from our lives, enjoying grandpa's presence for so much longer than you were blessed with here and now. People know too intimately what it's like to lose loved ones, and

with the promise of life after death and of the Church's grand reunion, it's not hard to understand why this is a person's first hope.

Or you may think of the end of bodily suffering. We know too many people, here in our church just as in our close circles, that do not get a break from their bodies. Their joints are decaying, their organs just don't work like the kidneys and intestines and livers of their neighbours'. Their minds are plagued by chemical imbalances that send them down trails of anxiety or pits of depression or wandering through fog and that is tiring. If Christ can promise a resurrected body that works, as He certainly does, then there are many who long to inhabit such flesh.

And speaking of flesh that works, flesh that doesn't self-sabotage, there are many so sick of their sin, so despairing of their constant state of corruption and the endless need to repent, so they hear the promises of paradise and breathe easy knowing that they will be sinless, living in the perfect righteousness of Christ.

For others, it's endless leisure after this life of seemingly endless toil; it's feasting after knowing want all their days; it's peace realized after a life of disruption after conflict after worry after...

Come, Lord Jesus, and make good on your promises at last.

You'd think that our Gospel lesson on the last Sunday of the Church year, the Sunday of Christ the King in the old lectionary, would be a picture of Christ coming back to bring judgment. You'd think we'd have a reading from Revelation of the saints resting in the bliss of paradise, in the new heavens or on the new earth. You'd think we'd hear from Thessalonians, the promise of the resurrection of the dead.

Instead we get Christ on the cross, praying for the forgiveness of those who hate Him, who hurt Him; Christ assuring this repentant man that He is forgiven, that paradise today will be His.

And this is perfect because all those perfect blessings, the promise of paradise is yours because of this Christ.

If Christ had not been willing to sacrifice His perfect life, you would not be freed from your sins; instead you would be tied to them from the day you committed them; you'd be bound to your corrupt nature from the day of your conception even, and it wouldn't cease through all damnation.

And if Christ were not raised from the dead, you would have no hope of resurrecting either, not for your own sake, nor for the sake of those that can't wait to be reunited with you. Instead, death would be your lot in life, and for

those complaining of broken bodies and minds, that would be just a foretaste of the death that is on its way.

Christ is the reason we can hope for goodness to be revealed in the end, that we can know true beauty will be seen with our own two resurrected eyes, that we can trust that life doesn't end after 80 or so years. Christ died so we do not need to doubt whether heaven will welcome us in, whether we will ever attain to a level of righteousness that will meet St. Peter's standards.

When Jesus prayed that they would be forgiven for they know not what they do, He wasn't only praying for the guards on duty, doing what they were told; His merciful words were not just for the Pharisees and Sadducees and those convinced by them that Jesus was a false messiah, someone leading the masses to judgment rather than salvation; His words of grace were not even just for those living in His day, whose sins would be paid for in that very hour.

His words, and the sacrificial actions that lead to the direct answer of such a prayer, is for all, and that means you. His death, the death of one without an ounce of sin, without a single blemish on His record, was for the entirety of His creation, from Adam and Eve in the beginning until whoever is the last to be conceived before He returns.

“We get that, pastor. You talk of Christ crucified more than a few times a year. When we’re thinking of the end, can we picture Him in glory, coming to breathe life to our dusty bones, robes of righteousness and life everlasting placed the body and soul united in paradise, in the company of all the saints at last?”

Certainly, you can think of that triumphant Christ, but that Christ coming back just the same way He left, descending among the clouds, now surrounded by angels in all His glory, is the same Christ that we see on the cross.

He’s no longer suffering. No, that He did only once, but His will, His purpose, His being remains the same. Christ on the cross is the image of the invisible God, saint Paul tells us. In Christ, in the manger, in the desert, feeding the masses, healing the crippled, dining with sinners, groaning in the garden, in this Christ, the fullness of God was pleased, delighted to dwell, and all for the sake of bringing us into His eternal kingdom. So just as that fresh saint on the cross, crying for Jesus to remember Him, just as He is welcomed into the kingdom by the Messiah who died for Him too, so when Jesus returns to call all whose names are written in the book of life, we are invited by the same Christ who yearned to die for us that we could be welcomed in, that we could be reconciled to heaven, to God Himself in spite of ourself.

And even still, Christ is not simply the necessary step to get what we hope for, for life and immortality and incorruptibility. No, the reality is, our hope is in Christ and our hope is for Christ. Heaven and the new earth won't be wonderful because Christ has welcomed us in and has prepared perfection for us. No, paradise will be perfect because we will be in the presence of Christ and in fact the Triune God, because we will be united with them, walking with them as God designed it to be, living in perfect faith and love in ways that we can't even fathom this side of eternity. And out of this, because we are with our Lord, united perfectly with Him in faith, we will get to experience all the other things that we think of when we think of heaven, but still they're just cool side-products of being with Christ.

He alone, from the start of your faith until at last it turns to sight, Christ crucified and risen for you is your only hope. He will return with the same love for you which He acted when He walked this earth; He will come with the same desire to draw you to Himself, to forgive you your death-deserving sin and supply you with His resurrection sealed life and perfect righteousness.

And indeed today, my friends, you will be with Him in paradise. You don't need to wait for life and peace and righteousness but instead He offers it to you by His promise, by His flesh and blood. I know, you can't see it or feel it, so it's a

little harder to comprehend, a little easier to doubt, but the same heaven that Jesus won on the cross, the same heaven that the criminal stepped into on Good Friday, the same heaven that will be revealed to you when your saviour returns, the same heaven is here because you have been forgiven, because you will be receiving a taste of the feast to come, because you are in the presence of Christ, crucified and risen, for you. Amen.