

"A PERFECT WORLD"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
December 10, 1995

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INTRODUCTION

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"And there shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots". And further on in this passage he adds, "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid....and a little child shall lead them."

And why will all of this one day take place, because he says:

"The earth shall be full...full of the knowledge of the Lord...as the waters cover the sea". (Isaiah 11: 9)

ONE DAY A PERFECT WORLD

Now, it is the testimony of both the Old and the New Testament that one day we shall live in a perfect world. The Hebrew Bible looks forward to the reign of the coming Messiah and our Bible ends with the promise of His return. The Scriptures of this Season of Advent call us to take those promises seriously and to look toward not only the coming of Christmas, but also to a world in which God's Kingdom will come - a world in which people will live in peace and in harmony together and Christ Jesus will reign over all.

Tony Campolo, in his book, The Kingdom of God Is A Party, tells of sitting in front of a television set in a hotel room in Zurich. He was in between planes on his way home from Africa and feelings of loneliness and some anxiety prevented

from dropping off to sleep. On to his television screen came some pictures of the closing celebration of the Olympic games. And, at first, the teams...wearing their official Olympic uniforms and carrying their national flags...marched around the stadium in a structured parade that had the look of soldiers "on review".

But then suddenly the Olympians broke ranks and they ran and danced with one another in a spontaneous outpouring of enthusiasm. Those neat and structured columns were lost...they disappeared. Those nationalistic identities were destroyed. No longer were there winners and losers, whites and blacks, communists and capitalists, Hispanics and Asians, rich and poor. There were only happy, dancing people hugging each other and loving each other. In that rare moment of ecstasy all divisions between humanity were wiped out. All of those socially created barriers that people build were forgotten. Joyful pandemonium and unspeakable joy were seen and felt. He was deeply moved as you and I would be.

What a beautiful picture of the Kingdom of God. What a beautiful picture of a perfect world. And really, what a shame that such outbursts of unity and of love happen only sporadically. Still, for me it is a hint, a whisper of the world as it will someday be....a world where people live together in peace and in harmony because God reigns in every heart!

BUT WE'RE NOT THERE YET

So...get ready friend. That perfect world is coming. And I believe that with all my heart!

Obviously, we're not there yet and there are times when we get a bit discouraged and feel that that glorious vision, that dream of the perfect world seems to be a long ways off.

We live in a very imperfect world, a world of betrayal and intrigue and of violence and in some ways it seems to be getting worse rather than better. We read that more children are becoming killers...more child abuse, more substance abuse and so on. Not exactly a perfect world, but the promise of Scripture is that one day all will be made right...one day all intrigue and betrayal and violence will be at an end and when that times comes, no one knows, but it is coming. "The wolf" yes..."will live with the lamb."

YES, AND WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY

But there is something else we need to note and come to terms with. There is a

group of people who have the responsibility for preparing for this perfect world and you and I have a pretty good idea who those people are. It's people like ourselves. The Church of Jesus Christ has something to do with it. I believe that every person who claims to be a Christian shares in that task and should be answering that call.

John the Baptist presides over the Second Sunday of Advent. Remember John who came preaching the Kingdom of Heaven...out there in the wilderness...locusts and honey...telling all who would listen to "repent"...to clean up their act, so to speak....even Herod, the King.

"Prepare the way of the Lord and make His paths straight". And people went out to hear John....the appeal of one man's conscience....to the masses of people.

In the days of the Babylonian Empire, engineer soldiers known as "sappers" would precede the monarch as he travelled in his chariot to visit his dominions.

These "sappers" would virtually construct the road that the King would travel on. They leveled the small hills and built up the ditches and filled in the pot-holes so that the royal chariot could make some speed. The command "prepare" means to push obstacles out of the way.

And in the same way John comes to us and tells us to repent of our sins and to join in the work of removing obstacles from the path of the King. Obstacles like hatred and fear, ignorance and exploitation, racism and selfishness. And the question is: who is going to move them if we - the followers of Christ - don't put our shoulders to the wheel of His chariot.

Now, we have to be careful here. Theologians are quick to tell us that we cannot build the Kingdom of God. The coming Kingdom is God's Kingdom and God alone can build it. True, but that does not mean that you and I don't have some role to play in it and there are things that we can do to prepare for that perfect world which one day is coming.

LIVE THE KINGDOM LIFE HERE AND NOW

One way...one thing...is to live that "Kingdom Life" here and now. Imagine, for a moment, a world in which every follower of Christ lived like He lived in their daily lives. Imagine, for a moment, that your life and mine were really characterized by righteousness and compassion, by faithfulness to His Word, with a passion for such things as courage and justice and the desire to tell the world that Christ is "the" King. One of the obstacles to this perfect world is right here at our own doorstep...right here within our own hearts. In those eloquent words of Pogo, "We have met the enemy and he is us!"

The Gospel of Jesus challenges each of us as the Church to live now in this world the life we'll one day share in that "eternal now". We are called to live the "Kingdom Life"...NOW. Can we? Friend, we must try!

POWER OF SELF-GIVING LOVE

And the second thing is to practice the power of self-giving love. Giving is what this season of the year is all about! Giving is what the life of Christ was all about! "God so loved the world...that He gave...."

Let me close with a story. John Aurelio in his book, Colors, tells of a boy who came upon a hermit's cabin deep in the northern woods. This hermit was known for doing good deeds for others and the hermit fed the boy and told him stories of the great saints and martyrs of the faith.

A day came when the hermit told the boy he was going on a trip and before he left, he wanted to give the boy something special. The special gift turned out to be a knife and as the hermit gave the boy the knife he said to him, "One day this may open heaven's gate for you".

The boy was puzzled. The ermit left and the boy never saw him again. The boy began to whittle with his new knife and soon found it to be an extraordinary knife for carving and before long he was carving some beautiful statues of the heroes in those stories the hermit had shared with him. The years passed and the boy grew into a man who devoted his life to carving religious statues. They were vibrant and life-like and here he was honoring God with his work as a wood-carver. But one day, after finishing his most beautiful work, an elaborate altar, he suffered a heart-attack and died.

When he reached the gates of Heavens, he found them locked...much to his surprise and he tried to pick the lock with his knife, but it didn't work. He was confused. He remembered that the hermit had told him when he was a boy that the knife would open the door to heaven, but it didn't work. And this woodcarver, confused and disappointed and unable to understand, returned to earth.

It was Winter where he lived. And it was one of the worst winters his town had ever had and the people of the town had used up all their firewood in heating their homes and now they were only days away from freezing to death. They couldn't cut down any trees because only the King's woodsmen were allowed to own axes. But the woodcarver knew immediately what to do. Using his special knife, he cut the arm off of one of his most beautiful creations and offered it to the people as firewood.

The people were shocked that he would destroy one of his statues and it broke the woodcarver's heart to do it, but then he knew how much the people needed wood for their fires. In the weeks of that severe winter that followed, time and again the woodcarver cut up more and more of his statues to give away as firewood and each time it broke his heart anew. By the end of the winter, his life's work was gone. Then, one day this broken-hearted woodcarver found himself in front of heaven's gate. And this time...this time the door, the gate opened easily. And there inside was the hermit with all the saints and the martyrs of the Faith whose statues the woodcarver had created back on earth. The dazzled woodcarver didn't understand and so the hermit explained, saying to him:

"Heaven's gate is opened only through the giving of ourselves to others....."

CLOSING As the wise old philosopher once said.....one day after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity....after all the scientific and technological achievements of this modern era....we shall harness for God the energies of love. And then...for the second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire!

PRAYER O God, Advent and Christmas are times for re-discovering the power of love....a love that will one day lead us to a perfect world. We know that heaven's gate was opened long ago for us by the gift of the Christ child to us. Help us as we make our preparations for His coming to us once again...preparations for that perfect world. Help us to live the "kingdom life" here and now...in the giving of ourselves in self-giving love. In the spirit of the Christ-child, we pray. Amen.

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