

Year A, Advent 1  
Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 24:37-44  
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
Dec. 2, 2007  
The Rev. John Spicer

### **For Whom the Bells Toll**

I think bumper stickers are a great source of material for theological reflection. Occasionally you see one that really captures part of the mystery of the Christian faith. My personal favorite bumper sticker in this category reads, "Jesus loves you whether you like it or not."

But more often, bumper stickers seem to imply that the owner of the car has some unique insight or status in God's eyes, and that he or she is crowing just a bit about that special relationship with Christ. One of these is particularly appropriate for this Sunday, given the Gospel reading we just heard. This bumper sticker reads something like, "Warning: In case of rapture, this vehicle will be unoccupied." That's cute – but it also has sort of a "Jesus loves me better than you" quality to it ... like the bumper sticker I've seen that reads, "Jesus loves you, but *I'm* his favorite."

But there's one bumper sticker that maybe goes best with the beginning of Advent and these readings we heard about the coming of the Son of Man. I like this one *not* because of its theological accuracy but just because it's fun. It imagines Jesus as the boss wandering through the office, dropping in on the staff members in their cubicles as they surf the Web on company time. This bumper sticker reads, "Jesus is coming – look busy."

Actually, we don't need much encouragement to meet *that* standard. In our culture, Advent is all about being busy. We have presents to buy, and stockings to stuff, and trees to decorate, and parties to plan. Everywhere we go, whether it's the mall or Target or a street corner in Brookside, we see people rushing around to get their Christmas shopping done. And in the midst of all this busyness, whether we're at the mall or Target or a street corner in Brookside, we also hear a sound piercing through the din of car engines and Christmas carols over loudspeakers – and that's the sound of a bell being constantly rung, the sound of that miserable, frozen man or woman stuck out there in the wind, ringing the bell for the Salvation Army collection pot.

The Salvation Army bells are such a fixture of our Christmas shopping that we might not even think about them anymore. But if we *do* give them some thought, we might wonder, in all our holiday busyness, "Why is the Salvation Army always out at Christmastime?" Part of it is simply that this is the time of year when the stores are full, and the Salvation Army knows a good opportunity when they see it. But there's more to it than that. We feel drawn to give to others at this time of year. And especially, we feel drawn at this time of year to give to those who poor and hungry and homeless. Why is that? Why now, as opposed to any other time of year?

It goes back to those three words on the bumper sticker – Jesus is coming.

In one sense, we know what this phrase means. We're remembering the little baby whose birth is the cause for all our celebration. Each year, we try to put ourselves back in time, waiting expectantly for the birth of Christ in our hearts. Each year, we use this time of Advent to prepare ourselves for a mystery simultaneously stunning and commonplace – that God chose to

become one of us, God With Us. We give gifts to each other to honor the gift of holiness, the spark of divinity, that dwells in each one of us because of that deep mystery of Incarnation. Jesus is coming to make us holy, to share the divine life with *us* – and we give to others this time of year simply to say, “Thank you.”

But the Salvation Army bell also reminds us that “Jesus is coming” in a different way. Jesus is coming in the person of every homeless man we see on the street, every hungry woman who comes by the church asking for food. You don’t have to be a biblical scholar to know that Jesus identified most with those whom the world around him rejected. “Whenever you care for the least of these my brothers and sisters,” Jesus says – the hungry or homeless or naked or poor or imprisoned – “you care for me.” So Jesus is coming every day, coming right toward us, in fact, in the person of every man and woman and child who shivers in the cold and wonders where their next meal is coming from.

And that Salvation Army bell reminds us of still another way that Jesus is coming – at the last day, when the bell will toll for each one of us. As today’s Gospel reading says, there won’t be any time to prepare once Christ actually returns. The time to get ready is now, for “the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour,” like a thief in the night (Matt 24:44). And there will be consequences for us. As much as we shy away from the reality of judgment, we can’t write it out of the Christian story. There are things that Jesus simply expects of us, things for which we’ll be held accountable at that last day; and caring for our neighbors is right there at the top of the list. The reading from Romans this morning makes it plain what the bottom line is for God. As Paul writes, all “the commandments ... are summed up in this word: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” “The one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” (Romans 13:9,8) So, at the last day, Jesus is coming as the judge of all the nations to ask us this fundamental question: Have you loved your neighbors? Have you loved *me*?

We have two great opportunities to say “yes” to those questions over the next four weeks of Advent, both sponsored by our OutReach Commission. When you head into the Jewell Room after the liturgy, you’ll see what I mean. In one corner of the Jewell Room, you’ll find the Christmas tree that always greets us this time of year. Usually, under that tree we gather presents for local children. This year, we’re gathering something else – socks and t-shirts and disposable razors and shaving cream and other personal-care items for the people who come to eat at the Kansas City Community Kitchen. With those items that you donate, we’ll make up gift bags, like this one, for each person who comes to the Kitchen on the Friday before Christmas. On the tree, you’ll find paper ornaments with particular things written on them – things like “six white cotton t-shirts” and “a package of 10 Chapsticks” and “a package of 52 disposable razors.” So, please take an ornament or two from the tree, go and buy the things it asks for, and bring them back, unwrapped, under the tree. Together, we’ll fill gift bags for each of the 500 people who come to the Kitchen each day.

That’s our first opportunity to reach out to Christ in person of those who are suffering. You’ll find the second opportunity at the other end of the Jewell Room, at the table devoted to our partner school in Maniche, Haiti. As in the past, you’ll have the chance to sponsor a child at the school in Maniche for the coming year, paying for his or her tuition *and* buying that child a book to own. You’ll get a card, like this one, that you can give as a Christmas gift – a donation made in honor of someone you love. It may sound like a small thing – \$50 that helps only a single child. But a year in school and the opportunity actually to own a book are treasures in Haiti, and that kind of education can make the difference in helping a child move out of the

poverty that chokes the nation. So stop at the Haiti table as well as the Christmas tree in the Jewell Room, and reach out to serve Christ both at home and abroad.

It's not that the children of Haiti need our help in Advent any more than other times of year. It's not that the people at the Kansas City Community Kitchen are hungrier now than they will be any other time of year. Hunger and poverty and fear and uncertainty and loneliness – these are the companions of our brothers and sisters 365 days a year. The difference is simply that we become aware of these needs now because, at some very deep level within us, we understand the mystery of incarnational theology far better than we think we do. As we begin to prepare ourselves for the incomprehensible reality that God will take on our life, with all its messiness and risk and pain, we know deep in our bones that Christ is present all around us. Whether it's a child in Haiti, or a hungry family downtown, or the person sitting in the pew next to you this morning, or you yourself, in your own pain and woundedness – in all these incarnations, Jesus is there, needing to be loved, needing to be served.

And when the time comes for our own reckoning, at the close of our lives and at the close of the age, we know that Jesus will come to us at that unexpected hour, as well. And it would be good to be able to say that our lives reflected something other than the busyness of our own concerns and our own priorities. Jesus will ask us, “When I was thirsty, when I was hungry, when I was naked, when I was alone, when I was poor – did you love me?” May the bells we will hear through the weeks of this Advent remind us to busy ourselves with the work of Christ. For he is coming to each of us, and always at an unexpected hour.