

## 20141120AdventSundaySermon *In the End Is the Beginning*

Sunday after Sunday we say in the creed: 'He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.' Now, we say this, but have we ever thought about what we are saying? At one time the belief in the second coming and a final judgement was one of the most relevant features of the Christian faith, and not just amongst American fundamentalist churches who speak about "the rapture" and the coming of the "end-times" with precise dates and times.

In the Middle Ages in English parish churches paintings of the second coming of Jesus and the judgement were depicted in vivid realism on the west end wall. Some English parish churches still have vestiges of these paintings. They were done not just to frighten people into faith and they were so important that all the other doctrines and all the festivals of Christianity were placed and derived from the idea of the second coming and judgement. The Church taught that History was moving towards an end and a fulfilment which will also be a new beginning. The old order would cease in order to make room for the new. Hence the judgement, the final reckoning and restitution - nothing spoiled, nothing unresolved, will be left over to spoil the new creation. Back in those days Christians were sure of this. What lay ahead, and the whole story of redemption - Christ's incarnation and atonement and exaltation and the gift of the Holy Spirit - made sense only in the setting of the scenario of the end and the new beginning. Thus the belief that 'he will come again' was in the background of every Christmas, every Good Friday, every Easter and every saint's day. There was no need of any special commemoration day of its own. It was an ever-present fact. It wasn't any more in the minds of Christians on Advent Sunday than on any other day of the year. Advent was, and still is, primarily a run-up to Christmas, a sort of prelude, making us more ready to enter into the excitement and the realization and the wonder of the first coming of Christ.

Thomas Cranmer in 1549 produced the first English prayer book and he drew together the first and second comings of Christ and in doing so combined the shepherds' pipes of Bethlehem with the trumpets of Doomsday in the poetic music of the beautiful collect for Advent Sunday from his Prayer Book:

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility, so that on the last day when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal.

Perhaps Cranmer did that because he had a strong sense of the continuous rhythm of the Christian year, so that as we come to the end we are already at the beginning. On Advent Sunday, the first Sunday of the liturgical year, we both look back to Bethlehem and forward to the end: the first and the second coming overlap in people's eyes. As T S Eliot said in his poem, "East Coker": *In my end is my beginning - my beginning is my end.*

I think, Cranmer was aware that the reformation in Europe, when he wrote this collect, was going to change Christianity from a corporate faith to an individualistic faith. It was no longer something that involved the rest of the world, no longer something that necessitated the future of the whole of humanity. It was much more **myself, my** faith, **my** relationship to God through Jesus Christ. "I am going to heaven" was stressed more than him coming again to earth for all humankind. Although this season is called "Advent" for the Latin *Adventus* 'to come' isn't it **going** rather than **coming** that is being emphasised? What does his coming again to this earth mean to us? In what sense is this necessary when our minds are fixed on making ourselves ready to **go** to him in heaven? Isn't it **a going** rather than **a coming** that ends our very individualistic concept of God's purpose? I am ready, so I will go. We hear from those same fundamentalist American awaiting God's second coming that the rapture will take place where those who are saved will **go** to Jesus. We have lost the sense of God's love, for the world and the relationships of the world.

Advent is also the time of the Advent antiphons, a version of which we still sing in the hymn 'O come, O come, Emmanuel!' And those Advent antiphons aren't just the first scene of a nativity play re-enacting the coming at Bethlehem. We are not just making ourselves better ready to remember that past coming, we are actually crying out for something new, something that will resolve the issues in our world right now.

The readings for Advent Sunday speak more of endings than beginnings. Look at the Gospel – it appears more a fanfare for the Apocalypse: *'But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory.* The Recessional hymn this morning is majestic in its imagery: *Thousand thousand saints attending, swell the triumph of his train; Alleluia! Alleluia! God appears on earth to reign. Every eye should now behold him robed in dreadful majesty.*

So we are talking more about Judgement than 'baby-in-a-manger'. More about end times than Christmas; the coming Kingdom. I always call the Sundays in November **The Kingdom Season**. All Saints, All Souls, Remembrance Sunday Christ the King speak to us about the future. Yet it is also harking back to an Old Testament hope that God will eventually bring a resolution to our problems and issues, bring an ending to our worldly troubles.

During the Communion at the 9:30 Service the choir will sing the 15<sup>th</sup> Century carol, *Adam lay ybounden* which speaks of humankind having gone astray but looking forward with hope to the coming of salvation: *Adam lay ybounden, Bounden in a bond; Four thousand winter Thought he not too long.* Humankind separated from God through Adam's fault. *And all was for an apple, An apple that he took, As clerkes finden Written in their book.* We are willing to wait 4000 years for that salvation to come. That hope was realised through Mary and so, as the Easter *Exultet* hymn says "O Happy fault of Adam" because it enabled God to come to earth in human form through Mary: *Ne had the apple taken been, The apple taken been; Ne had never our lady Abeen heavene queen.*

Christian Hope is a strange thing; complex to explain, complex to understand. It is more than a vague preference for what the future might hold e.g that we hope the Bafana-Bafana might do well in the CAF Cup next year. On Friday at our St Aidan's Fellowship meeting Fr Keith Griffith did the spiritual reading and in the chapter of a book he read to us, the author described Advent as being like expecting a baby. What we hope for is not that the baby is going to come, it is going to come regardless and there is nothing a mother can do to help. But what we hope for is the effect that baby will have on us – that it will be health, how it will our lifestyle, our feelings, our emotions.

Yes we know the baby Jesus is coming – nothing we can do to stop it – and yes, we know that Jesus will come again in Judgement. What we hope for is how Jesus' coming will affect us. Yes, that is what we all hope. Hope lies in our hearts. Hope for the Christian church means something longed for and something that will definitely come. That hope is promised to us, though we can't always imagine its fulfilment. This world is loved by God and matters to God, and in some way - unimaginable way - this world will achieve its total fulfilment in Jesus Christ. As the Carol ends it says: *Blessed be the time That apple taken was, Therefore we moun singen, Deo gracias Thanks be to God*

This is the message of Advent – Jesus is coming. So we can sing *deo Gracias* or we can sing, as we will sing in our Recessional hymn: *Yea amen let all adore thee, high on thy eternal throne; Saviour take thou power and glory claim the kingdom for thine own: Alleluia! thou shalt reign, and thou alone. Amen*

Loosely based on ideas in an Essay by John V Taylor.