

Sermon for CCSY
Advent Sunday, Nov 29, 2009

What does Advent mean for us today, on Advent Sunday, as we begin the Church's year?

Perhaps for most of us it signals that the preparations for Christmas have now officially begun. Already the shops are advertising, already we're thinking of a tree and decorations, already contemplating the office Christmas party, the gifts we'll give and receive, the food preparation, the family dinner ...

And already we're starting to agonise over how much we'll spend, how big our bankcard debt will be this year, how much weight we'll put on, who we should buy presents for and who not, how the relatives are going to get on this year.

When you think about it, for all its excitement—especially if there are children involved—Christmas is a seriously frenetic time, stressful, exhausting even. If we were honest we'd admit that we all breathe a sigh of relief when Boxing Day comes, when it's over, and we can relax with left-over turkey and the cricket on the telly.

So it's hard for us, as Christians, to see how any of that frantic preparation relates to the time of Advent that carries through the next four weeks.

Yes, it's true at one level: Advent *is* about preparation, but it's a different kind of preparation: the church calls us to re-align ourselves, our loyalties, our priorities, our hearts, to what really matters. If anything, it calls us away from a frenzy of social activities and consumerism, to ponder the deepest and truest spiritual realities of our lives.

So what it is we're preparing for in Advent?

The answer to that may seem simple enough. Surely we're preparing for the birth of Jesus Christ? Surely, by preparation, we're meant to put ourselves back into the past—back to the time of the census and the journey, the scandal and the late pregnancy, the expectation, the waiting to give birth? We're preparing, are we not, for the arrival of the baby Jesus?

And that is so, up to a point. But Advent is not like Lent, where we're preparing ourselves, pure and simple, to celebrate Easter. Advent's not the equivalent of Lent—the Lent you have in readiness for Christmas. Advent's as much about the *other* Coming of the Lord—not just in the past, but also in the future. It's about the *future* Coming, the advent of the Son of Man, to use the language Luke uses in our Gospel reading today.

It's about the ending of this present age, and the beginning of the age to come, the advent of God's reign: the end of sadness and violence, the end of evil and injustice and death; the beginning of reconciliation and joy and gladness in God's new world. 'The days are surely coming,' as our reading from Jeremiah portentously begins.

I suspect that most of us, most of the time, don't think very often about the future Coming of the Lord. Even though every time we participate in the eucharist, we proclaim, sincerely enough, 'Christ has died, Christ is risen, *Christ will come again.*' For all that, it's not much on our radars.

And maybe that's because we find it hard to relate to all that imagery of the sun fading, and the stars falling from the heavens, and picture of Christ floating down on the clouds with an angelic brass band in attendance.

But all that language and imagery is metaphorical, couched in the terms of the ancient world, with heaven above and earth below. It's not meant to be a literal description of future reality, anymore than the opening chapters of Genesis are meant to describe the creation of the world.

What it does say is that Jesus will return, just as Genesis tells us that God created the world. Neither of them is concerned with the actual mechanics.

Indeed, all these images of cosmic disintegration in Luke's Gospel express the radical nature and implications of Christ's future advent and how it will turn the world and all its values on their heads: as Mary says earlier in Luke's Gospel, 'pulling down the mighty from their thrones and raising the lowly; filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty.' The imagery is about the radical change in the way the world operates.

And that means that our true stance at Advent is one of *waiting* and *longing*; we wait and we long for the Lord's Coming, for God's future to transform us. We wait for the fullness of life we don't yet have; we long for the peace and joy that we lack, and that only his Coming will bring—for us and for our world.

We long for God, God who is the truest and deepest reality of our lives; and we long for the end of pain and suffering and separation and death. We long to be at one with God, and with the loved ones who have gone; we long for a world renewed.

One of the early Fathers rightly said that there are three senses in which the Lord comes to us: three ways in which we can speak of his advent. The first is his coming to us in mortal flesh, as the babe of Bethlehem. The second is his future coming to fulfil all things, as in our Gospel reading. It's about the future, *God's* future, and it orients us towards that future.

And there's a third Coming, in the present, day by day: when the infant in swaddling clothes and the future, glorious Son of Man come to us in the *present*, out of the past and out of the future. This daily advent, in a way, awakens and intensifies those deepest longings; these longings that are the compass of our lives, that turn us back, again and again, towards God.

So this Advent, amidst the flurry of socialising and retail, let's hold to what's important, what lies at the core of our identity as Advent Christians. Let's not exhaust ourselves with the secondary things; but let's make time, take time, for waiting and longing; and for looking back to the Christ who *has* come, but even more importantly looking forward to the Christ who *will* come, and who will make all things new.

And as we await with longing, let us each week seek the Advent Christ in the one place where God's past and God's future meet together—in the eucharist, and in the greatest gift of all: the gift of Christ's body and blood.

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