

Advent 1 Year C 2021

Happy New Year - and welcome to Advent, on this first Sunday of the 3rd cycle in the Church's year, the year of St Luke, that most poetic of the Evangelists. To him we owe the Magnificat, the Nunc Dimittis and the great canticle of Morning Prayer, the Benedictus. He certainly has a way with words. But today's words, the last reaching of Jesus before his passion, in Luke's Gospel, - well, they are hardly joyful, hardly encouraging; indeed, frightening. What a way to start a New Year.

But if you think about the Gospel - God's good news - it is not about terror and evil and 'end times'; it is about love, and mercy and truth. Jesus tells us 'I am the way', not I used to be the way, I was the way, but I AM the way - and he is the one who is and was and is to come; I AM - present tense, but not just present tense for Luke, who looks to the future. So, even if we knew for sure that the world was about to end, and it will if we go on treating it the way we do, if we knew for example that the last day would be February 30th 2029, what would you, or I, do differently tomorrow? Well, I hope you, and I, would do nothing different; or if we had to do something different try harder to

re-use, recycle, re-green God's good earth, and be better neighbours to others and to our planet.

After all, if the only way we can motivate people to live a life of goodness is to threaten them with the end time and the judgement to come (the religion I was brought up in - 'do that again and you will end up in hell!') - that will motivate no-one to goodness and says nothing positive about our belief in a loving, merciful God. If we only follow Christ so that we won't be thrown out at the end - are we really following Christ? I think not. The world doesn't need nay-sayers, dour predictors - it needs delighters, positive builders, god-lovers, dancers, joy makers. To suggest that my earthly life will one day end is not morbid teaching - it is facing reality. To live, as my mother did, in the belief of physical immortality, is to live a lie - she couldn't cope with the thought of death so denied its existence, at least for herself. So denying your own physical death is to live a lie. I said to someone recently 'I pity the person who has to clear up my place when I go' because I have so much stuff, only to be told 'don't think like that, don't talk like that' but one day I will go; it might be tomorrow, it might be in twenty years' time, but go I must. To think otherwise is self-deception - it is taking ourselves

not seriously enough - but the Gospel asks us to take ourselves very seriously. There will be an end-time, and in the in-between time, between now and then - what? Do we follow the one who brings hope and love, care and mercy - or do we judge, condemn, deprecate and despair?

Advent is a time of anticipation and waiting, but what are we waiting for, what are we anticipating? Well, clearly we are anticipating our celebration of the birth of Jesus at Christmas - this is the beginning of the countdown - although lots of people, and certainly retailers, have been counting down for weeks. And as we recall Christ's coming as a baby in Bethlehem, we also call for his next coming - although perhaps with not so much enthusiasm - yes, come Lord, come soon - but not too soon. We would rather carry on as we are for the time being.

What is the legitimate balance between what we currently possess - love, comfort, enjoyment, security - and the desire, so often expressed in the NT and especially in Paul's letters, for it all to come to an end and be replaced by the reign of Christ the King? And what do we mean by 'Christ's second coming'; given that he told his disciples 'I am with you always'?

There are those who predict terrifying judgement - and guess which side of the judgement they think they will be on! But if God is unchanging, unchangeable, can Jesus be any different in his second coming than he was in his first? The woman at the well in Sychar - the one who had had all those husbands as wasn't married to the current one - what did he offer her? Judgement or hope? He offered her living water. What did he say to Zacchaeus? You're doomed - or 'I am coming to your house for tea'? And think of the woman caught in prostitution - go, sin no more, you are forgiven. The 'servant' of the centurion - that is, his lover, was healed. Peter denied knowing him, but was he thrown out? Jesus offers for the dead, life; for the sick, healing; for the hungry, food - only for the self-righteous - you hypocrites - condemnation.

Should we be frightened at the thought of the second coming of Christ? Well, only you can look at your life and look at your heart and answer that question. Only I can look at my life and say 'have mercy on me, a sinner' and trust in that mercy. So, stand tall. Hold your heads high - and if you feel you can't - there is still time - we know neither the day nor the hour, but from this

moment on there is time for amendment of life, time to receive the grace and comfort of the Holy Spirit.

Yes, we wait throughout Advent to celebrate the coming of our Lord, but waiting does not have to be passive. Time to get on with the job of bringing in the kingdom. And how joyful is that?