

Advent, Apocalypse, and Good News

Sermon for Advent Sunday, Year C, 2 December 2018
(and 30th anniversary of my 1st mass, Advent Sunday, 4 December 1988)

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor, ACT, Australia

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Jeremiah 33: 14-16; Psalm 25: 1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3: 9-13; Luke 21: 25-38

+In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Whenever you hear about religion in the media these days, and especially on the ABC, it's typically described as intolerant, stubbornly ideological, and often violent. Islam has to bear the brunt of this assessment, because Muslims are typically more visible than Christians in society and so they're guilty of the greatest secular sin, which is to let religion out in public. Religion has been edited out of the modern public domain since the Enlightenment, tolerated in private perhaps but not when it comes to how things go in the real world.

But how much of this bad press have we brought on ourselves? Too often we've practiced an exclusionary, self-justifying form of righteousness, meant to mark out the decent respectable people from the less worthy. And we've thought that this is what religion

means. We've exported the taint of unworthiness onto the vulnerable and we've tolerated their victimization, covering it up so that the often uncomfortable truth about us and our religious institutions can be kept under wraps. Too much self-righteousness and smug disapproval has given us a bad name, even if the present generation of clergy and parishioners don't typically deserve it—and God knows that all those good Muslim citizens don't deserve it.

Friends, our readings on this Advent Sunday help put things right on the matter of religion. Our Gospel with its apocalyptic message isn't yet more hostility directed at the world from our religious ivory tower. This is because the word apocalypse doesn't mean destruction, it means unveiling—unveiling or revealing the truth about God, which in this case also means revealing and hence judging the untruth about a version of religion that gets God wrong.

So what we have in today's Gospel isn't fire and brimstone. Instead, it's a sociologically sensitive critique of bad religion, focussed on the temple. The coming destruction of the temple by the Romans is interpreted here in cosmological terms. The sacrificial religion of the temple that had long become corrupt is faced here with the announcement of its end. The human business of temple religion, which is widely understood to placate a touchy God, is confronted by a newer version of religion in Jesus Christ. We see Jesus marking the

two poles of religion: there's the temple, against which he preached during the day, the place of God's supposed presence, and there's the Mount of Olives to which he retreats by night, which as we know became the place of God's absence for Jesus—of heartfelt prayer not answered.

But in the very darkness of Gethsemane and the cross, in the apocalypse of comforting, self-justifying religion that Good Friday represents, we find paradoxically the fulness of God's presence; we discover for the first time how much God is for us, and not against us. Religion centred on the gift of a loving God, rather than placating an angry one, means a religion in which God's love makes us righteous, beyond the angry fearfulness that it takes to make us self-righteous. Here is religion made by God and not according to human specifications, and hence this apocalypse of the temple and the religious cosmology that's passing away that we hear about in today's Gospel.

And this message is carried through in our other readings this morning, with great consistency.

Jeremiah has been telling God's people that their lack of faith and obedience has led them to invasion, defeat and exile, but in today's passage he declares that God will send a new leader to God's people

who will make them righteous despite their failures. And of course that means that self-righteousness is no longer either necessary or desirable. God's people can consign self-righteous religion to the past, because it turns out that God has never been in that business.

Our psalm picks up this theme, reassuring us that it's God's faithfulness, God's guidance, God's empowerment that we can rely on to school us and shape us in righteousness, though our own teachability and openness to God is crucial. And in our 1 Thessalonians reading today, Paul completes the picture by showing us the importance of Christian fellowship and pastoral care for building our confidence and helping us find our way with God. Paul encourages the Corinthian Church, and points to what God can do with it, just as good pastoral and episcopal leadership does with our congregations and dioceses to this day.

So in none of these readings are we given any encouragement to self-righteousness, and to brittle, self-regarding religion more generally. Instead, the apocalypse of Jesus Christ, of which we have a foretaste in Advent, is the apocalypse of every unworthy religious cosmology, every exclusionary and sacrificing religious culture. In other words, everything that the ABC hates about religion. But that leaves the real thing, the religion of Jesus Christ, where the righteousness is his and the self-righteousness is being left behind,

and sinners like me are being helped to find our feet with an infinitely patient God.

Here in the Eucharist all this is made flesh and pressed into our open hands. Here is where religion comes into its own, beyond all the bad forms and attitudes that are rightly criticised today.

So, friends, as a result of what we see and do here today, we can go out and show society something that it doesn't understand and can't fathom: a religion that's humanistic, life-giving, inclusive, and all because it wears the face of Jesus Christ. Friends, this is what's coming, and Advent is an urgent invitation for us to jump on board.

The Lord be with you.