

First Sunday of Advent - 2017

So welcome to Advent, a new season, indeed a new liturgical year. The colours have become muted... violet, flowers have been replaced by an Advent wreath. But let's not confuse this season with Lent which we sometimes tend to do. Lent is a truly penitential season, the Lenten disciplines serve to help us enter into the events of Holy Week and Good Friday. Advent is different, concluding at Midnight on Christmass Eve, it is there to help us appreciate joy more fully. We are preparing for a coming, *Adventus* means coming. But there's more..... a whole lot more! Our readings today give us the background to what that might mean for us.

The church is often seen to be out of step with the world, and broadly speaking that is a good thing. The Church exists in the world *and* pre-emptes the world to come. We are both the 'People of God' *and* the mystical Body of Christ. This antithesis is no more clearly seen than this time of year. The world out there is going just a little crazy whilst in here we have become just a little sombre, just a little introspective; no *Glorias* for us.... not yet! No Rudolph for us...not yet! The vast majority of the folk out there are already into the Christmas cheer, we are awaiting, we might call this 'delayed gratification' it is the mark of Christian discipline.

The delayed gratification thesis was developed in the late 1960s. A professor at Stanford gave a group of children a marshmallow each and told them they could eat it now or wait and be rewarded shortly with a second one. He then left them alone for 15 minutes. Some kids waited, others could not; the professor then monitored the kids. Those who waited had fewer behavioural problems, lower stress, stronger friendships, and even better academic scores. Now I can't promise you that keeping a patient Advent will do the same thing but it will help you to enjoy the Christmass season more fully, too many of us arrive at Christmass exhausted and glad it's all over.

But there is more as I say. Not only are we preparing to celebrate the nativity we are recalling that in the words of the creed Christ will come to judge the quick and dead. This thinking created the doctrine of the 'second coming.' I think we need to be mindful of the fact that term 'the second coming' is not strictly speaking Biblical. Many texts mention Christ's return but not strictly 'second coming.' The early church believed that Jesus would return, and soon, to wrap all things up. We can see that in a number of passages but as the years passed many realised that these 'end days' as they became known would go on and that we were called to be patient and to look for the coming of Jesus in different ways.

With this way of thinking we need to begin to consider another important element of Jesus' coming... his death and resurrection. When Jesus speaks of what is to come, he warns us to stay awake...he said this to the disciples in Gethsemane on that fateful night, he warned too of earthquakes and the sun failing to shine, these occurred at the crucifixion, can we not say then that Jesus coming on the clouds is a vision of the resurrection? Can we not say then that 'second coming' has already occurred? The call to be alert then is a rallying cry to look for the apocalypse in its broadest sense...revelation, to see God's hand at work, to see things anew, to see visions and dream dreams. As we read this morning Isaiah dreamt of the day God would be revealed. We are to look for opportunities to make the crucified and risen Christ present, to bring life, to bring peace - shalom to bring to birth that quiet joy that is the mark of our tradition as the carol says 'silently so silently the wondrous gift is given.'

So our watching and waiting is not strictly for fire, earthquake, wind, the traditional apocalyptic scenarios, remember Elijah and the still small voice within, and recall too Jesus calls on us to watch for the budding of the fig tree. It strikes me that those who advocate apocalypse in the narrow meaning of that term usually have a different agenda! Our Diocesan Theologian one year wrote this at Advent:

From political parties locked in the hysteria of manufactured mutual exclusion, with the help of a media hungry for incident, to the beat-ups of the tabloids about who's leaving who for whom, to the adversarial world of reality TV and the endless dysfunctional drama of the Kardashians family, we manufacture incident, division, conflict, violence and scapegoats. And all this so we can be diverted from the boring business of just abiding quietly with those among whom we live and work, enjoying life's deepest pleasures of growing, creating and loving, finding in these simple rhythms and the biblical God who blesses them, enough meaning and purpose to be going on with. Instead it's in our sinful natures to create drama, to be transfixed by idols.

Jesus' call is to wait and watch so we can recognize what God's *really* involved in, what God's *really* like, in contrast with what our old baptism liturgy calls 'the empty display and false values of the world'. Can we wait out the glitter and tinsel of the secular season to what really matters? Can we wait out the politics and popular media to what really matters?

It is my prayer that we can wait for the second marshmallow during this blessed season. That we can indeed delay gratification, which is so often superficial, and in doing so realize the deeper truths that lie behind this time that has been given to us. Time to consider the wonder of Emmanuel, God with us and what ultimately that means, for us and for our world. Amen.