

“Waiting with Hope” Luke 21:25-36 Advent Sunday 02.12.2018
(Other readings Jeremiah 33:14-16 and Thessalonians 3:9-end)

May I speak and may you listen in the name of God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit

And so once more the Advent wreath or crown stands by our altar table. Four candles - coloured, and the white Christ candle in the middle which will first be lit at our midnight Eucharist/Mass on Christmas Eve. The symbolism of the modern Advent wreath may vary depending on your own learning. It was first used by the Lutheran church in the middle of the nineteenth century. My understanding is that the candle we have lit this morning represents the Patriarchs of the Old Testament - the likes of Abraham, Moses, David - and stands for “hope”. The circular shape reminds us of the unending love of God; while the evergreen decoration stands for our Lord’s promise of everlasting life. Sometimes the wreath may be adorned with red berries to signify the blood of Christ and the sacrifice he made for us all.

The word “Advent” derives from a word whose Latin roots mean “a coming” or “an arrival”. So today, the first day of a new Christian year, we can consider three arrivals - an arrival in the past, another today in the present and the third an arrival yet to come in the future. The Church invites us in our imagination to adopt a position of waiting, waiting for Christ, our Saviour, to come to us to give us renewed zest for life, to put us together again when he shall come in glory - the second coming. Yet Christ is not absent until he comes in glory - there is another coming - a more everyday coming, in a very discrete way, so discrete that we will only discover him at work if we look for him longingly and open our hearts and minds to him in prayer. During Advent we will also look back to Christ’s first coming as a vulnerable babe, born in a stable and we shall prepare to celebrate his wonderful incarnation.

There is a striking paradox about the Advent season. As we wait and prepare to celebrate the birth of the Christ child, we are offered, in this morning’s Gospel, an apocalyptic vision of cosmic distress which will usher in the Kingdom of God. The Church asks us to consider death, as well as life, and darkness, as well as light, in our lives. Meditation during

Advent, especially at its start, concentrates on the “four last things” - death, judgement, hell and heaven. Now these things are not being sold in our shops and will be unlikely topics of conversation at our forthcoming Christmas parties, but they are suitable Advent fare because they inform us that something of ultimate importance is at stake. The baby who is to be born is coming to change the world and to offer it - and us - the choice between light and darkness, life and death. The context of this morning’s Gospel is Jerusalem, Holy Week, two or three days after Jesus’ triumphant ride into the Holy City and two or three days before his death, his crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus knows his work on this Earth in human form is almost completed, so he turns his attention to his Second Coming, when “the Son of Man will come in a cloud with power and great glory.” And Jesus tells his disciples of the great hope that when these things happen their redemption, and our redemption, is drawing near. In the first Reading Jeremiah prophesies concerning the characteristics of the Messiah, of the Christ we know:

“In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.” We might say he shall practice honesty and integrity, speaking truthfully and acting truthfully. Oh! for the coming of such a time - it seems today far off.

If you are now confused, if you find it difficult to consider the language of opposites, if the Advent paradox stretches your own understanding of your faith, this is no bad thing for the waters are often muddy before they become clear and you are in excellent company. In her beautiful poem “November Sonnet” Elizabeth Jennings writes:

“This is the season of right doubt
While that elected child waits to be born.”

We have just experienced an exceptional November, that month of remembrance, which begins with All Saints and All Souls when we commemorate both the heroes of the Christian tradition and our own personally beloved dead. We then acknowledged as a country, as a Diocese, as a Church the events which led to the signing of the Armistice one hundred years ago and all those killed and affected by wars since. The rugged oaks and firm chestnuts have now lost their iridescent leaves and stand naked to the fierce-some winds. The year draws to an end, the nights are longer and darker now, but Jesus tells a parable:

“Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves that summer is already near.”

Life and death, light and darkness- inescapable in our period of Advent, a period of mystery and awesome wonder as we wait, wait with hope for that unborn child.

Early in November this year, when the trees were still rich with colour, the Parish held a Quiet Day at Mill House. Led by David James and entitled “We must cultivate our garden”, our souls were fertilised with the three virtues of faith, hope and love. David talked about and showed us Holman Hunt’s painting “The Light of the World”. Although I hadn’t looked at this painting for some time I know it well. It was a strong feature on the wall of mum and dad’s bedroom and was the earliest image I had of Jesus. He stands outside a closed door, knocking and waiting. The forbidding door has no keyhole, no chinks through which light can filter. It has the power to withstand the light completely, unless it is opened.

“Listen! I am standing at the door knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come to you and eat with you, and you with me.” Jesus has come and we must keep alert for his second coming. Or is that second coming here now, if only we open the door and let him come in. Jane Williams in her marvellous book “The Art of Advent” summarises my thoughts well:

“We are invited during Advent to take the initiative, find our best selves, to be willing to open the door to the baby in need. God does not come into the world with a battering ram, but with a cry: open the door.”

William Pattinson

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