

STRANGE TRICKS WITH TIME

Isaiah 2. 1-5
Romans 13. 11-14
Matthew 24. 36-44

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. In the media, the season is called 'the run-up to Christmas' and even in the Church we sometimes do not give as much thought to Advent as we should do. But when we do think about Advent, it can seem to play strange tricks with time. We all know Advent to be the season when we look forward to the birth of our Lord. Advent heralds the approach to Christmas. But, as is clear from our Advent hymns, we also look forward to the Second Coming of Jesus. So although we sing, 'O come, O come, Emmanuel', we also sing 'Lo! he comes with clouds descending'.

When we talk of 'looking forward to the birth of our Lord', we know that this is only a manner of speaking. The birth of Christ took place some two thousand years ago, and what we now look forward to is Christmas, our annual celebration of that event. This distinction is expressed very well in the Anglican Collect for Christmas Day: 'Almighty God, you have given us your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him and, *as at this time*, to be born of a pure virgin.' When, however, we look forward to the Second Coming, we are in our own present time, gazing to an unknown future.

The Collect for the First Sunday of Advent, which we heard before the readings, brings out this play with time in a most startling way. Unlike most of the Collects, which have come down to us from the medieval Church, the Collect for the First Sunday of Advent was composed by Cranmer himself when he was compiling *The Book of Common Prayer*. Listen to it again:

‘Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and to put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility; that on the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.’

‘Give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and to put on the armour of light, *now* . . .’ Suddenly, it is not the historical past or the unknown future that is brought before our minds, but the immediate present: *now* in St Peter Port, at approximately ten to ten on Sunday 27th November 2016; it is *now* that we are to cast away the works of darkness.

But then, as the Collect goes on, this present moment is extended back in time: ‘now in the time of this mortal life;’ for each of us, the ‘time of this mortal life’ is the whole of our life, the past, present and future; every moment of it. This is the time that we are given to cast away the works of darkness. And then, as the Collect continues, it takes us still further back in time, back in history to the earthly life of Christ: ‘now in the time of this mortal life, in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility.’

So at Advent we look back to the birth of Christ and his ministry on earth; we look forward to our yearly celebration of his birth at Christmas; and we look still further forward to his coming again, when he will judge the living and the dead. But to put it just like that is to forget that emphatic ‘now’. If, on Advent Sunday, all we do is to look back to Christ's earthly life and forward to his coming again, our present life seems to occupy a sort of interval when nothing much is going on. Something decisive happened in history; something decisive will happen beyond history, but nothing decisive seems to happen now. Christ came to visit us two thousand years

ago and, we believe, will come again, although we cannot picture what that will be like. Perhaps we can picture it as Charles Wesley does in his marvellous hymn, 'Lo! he comes with clouds descending'; but we know, as Wesley surely knew, that the reality will far transcend our picture of it. Meanwhile we are, it seems, left with nothing but remembrance and anticipation, as if in the long interval between the two Christ was altogether unoccupied time.

Cranmer, in his prayer, twice warns us against this; first in that emphasis on 'now', and then, at the close of the Collect, when we pray 'that we may rise to the life immortal; through him who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.'

As you will have noticed, when Cranmer began his Collect by writing, 'Give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and to put on the armour of light,' he was drawing upon the words of St Paul in his epistle to the Romans, which we also heard a moment ago: 'For salvation is nearer to us *now* than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light.'

There is an enormous sense of urgency in this, which is well brought out in the New English Bible translation of this passage. It reads: 'In all this remember how critical the moment is. It is time for you to wake out of sleep.' The Authorized Version conveys this too with its rendering, 'Now it is high time to wake out of sleep'. The moment is critical because it depends on our decision *now*; our decision whether Christ is received into our hearts and whether his love is shown in our lives.

When the Collect says, 'now in the time of this mortal life, in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility,' we are to think not only of our Lord's life and

death in Palestine, but also of the risen life which he shares now with all who will receive him.

We find this double emphasis in many of our Christmas hymns. For example the writer of 'O little town of Bethlehem' takes the Christmas story and applies it to our present experience:

'How silently, how silently
the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming
but in this world of sin
Where meek souls will receive him still
the dear Christ enters in.'

This double emphasis in the Christian Gospel on sharing in the risen life of Christ is the central message of Advent. On the one hand, there is the story of our redemption set in the past, and a story of judgement and forgiveness to be realised in the future; and on the other hand, a call to accept Christ into our hearts and lives here and now. But once we have recognised this two-fold pattern, we shall find it every Sunday of the year, and every day when we celebrate the Eucharist.

The Eucharist is an act of remembrance and of anticipation: we are looking back in time and looking forward in time to a consummation beyond time. We are thus made aware week by week of our place in a great cosmic drama of redemption which gives meaning to every moment of our lives. But we also 'feed on him in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving' and, in the prayer of Humble Access, we pray that 'we

may so eat the flesh of your dear son Jesus Christ and drink his blood that . . . we may evermore dwell in him and he in us'.

Unless we allow Christ to enter into our hearts here and now, to visit us in great humility, the story of redemption fails to come alive for us; and the work of redemption is not fulfilled in us.

All this, in a miracle of compression, is set before us in the Collect for the First Sunday of Advent, with which I will end as I began:

‘Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and to put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility; that on the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.’

Amen.