

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

Jeremiah 33. 14-16
 1 Thessalonians 3. 9-13
 Luke 21. 25-36

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

The word Advent, as many of you know, finds its origins in the Latin word *adventus*, which means ‘to come’ but which can also be understood as ‘arrival’.

In the Christian Church, we often talk about our journey of faith and the fact that we are all journeying towards our death, when we hope to meet God face to face. But the new Church Year, which begins today on Advent Sunday, turns all that upside down; for we spend the next four weeks (and this year, we really do have four full weeks of Advent) thinking about God *coming to us*.

Firstly, the Word was made flesh in the womb of Mary, that little space that God chose to be his home for nine months as he prepared for his first coming in Bethlehem. But Advent is also *still to come*; for Jesus will come again, and his second coming will usher in a new creation. Our Resurrected and Ascended Lord will come again as judge; and he will come as the judge who brings justice and righteousness.

Our appointed gospel passage for the First Sunday of Advent provides us with a number of contrasts to consider. As we read in verse 25 of the ‘signs’ that will precede the second coming of Christ, we remember that when our Lord first came to the earth, the shepherds were told that they would see a ‘sign’, a ‘child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger’ (2. 12). When our gospel text announces in verse 27 that the Son of Man will come in a cloud with ‘power and glory’, we cannot help but contrast this with the humility and helplessness of a babe who was laid in a manger, because there was no space at the inn (2. 7). And when Jesus warns that

there will be ‘distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves’ (21. 25), we are tempted to compare this to the message of ‘good news of great joy for all the people’ (2. 10) that was brought by the angel at Christ’s birth. As odd as it might seem to draw these contrasting images together, there is wisdom in it.

Parker Palmer, in his excellent little book called *The Promise of Paradox*, wrote: ‘The way we respond to contradiction is pivotal to our spiritual lives.’ Paradox requires ‘both/and’ instead of ‘either/or’ thinking. One dictionary defines paradox as ‘a statement or proposition that seems self-contradictory or absurd, but in reality expresses a possible truth.’¹ Keeping space for paradox is difficult.

But the gospels are full of paradox. In St Luke’s gospel, for example, the infant Jesus is more than a baby born in a manger. He is also ‘a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord’ (2. 11). He is both infant and Saviour. Elsewhere in St Luke’s gospel, our Lord teaches that ‘those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it (17. 33). Both losing one’s life and keeping it. Or think of that verse in St Luke’s gospel where Christ says to his disciples, ‘Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division’ (12. 51); yet after the resurrection, he declares, ‘Peace be with you!’ (24. 36). There is both division and peace. On a theological level, Christians affirm paradox all the time: we acknowledge that our Lord’s crucifixion led both to death and to new life. We proclaim that Jesus was both fully God and fully human. More is going on than meets the eye.

Returning to Luke 21, we find still more paradox in its apocalyptic language. Destruction, death, and betrayal are coming, but hope is there in the midst of it all (21. 18-19). Earthly trials and tribulations are portrayed as temporary, and

¹ The word paradox comes from the Greek *para*, ‘contrary to’ and *dokein*, ‘to think, seem, appear’.

vindication for God's chosen ones as imminent. Their redemption, Christ teaches his disciples, 'is near' (Lk 21. 28). There is both suffering and comfort.

In Luke 21, our Lord reminds his followers that there is always more going on than meets the eye. There is more to reality than we might see at first glance. Not 'either/or', but 'both/and'.

The fact that more is going on than meets the eye is precisely why we must 'be on guard' (21. 34) and 'be alert at all times' (21. 36). Jesus calls his followers to be prepared and aware.

Advent may not be a time of fasting, but it still requires of us the same kind of 'turning around' that is demanded in Lent: a repentance of mind and heart so that we are ready to greet Christ when he comes. We are to have our lamps lit and our houses swept. Advent is not a time of passivity; it is a time of activity and preparation, of getting our house in order for the return of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. I am reminded of a box that was given to me by my daughter on the date of my ordination as deacon. The box is made of metal, and an image of our Lord is painted on its top. Beneath the image is a caption, which reads: 'Jesus is coming. Look busy!'

Yes, you and I are to be busy this Advent. Our Advent busy-ness should, however, be very different to the busy-ness we will see in town as people frenetically prepare for Christmas. Our Advent busy-ness should be about our priorities: we are to be busy putting God first and to be busy searching for him.

And as we prepare for Christmas, let us not be so myopic that we forget God's vision for the world: a vision that is God's to control, a vision that is far broader and more expansive than 'either/or' thinking can allow. What is at stake is not just another

annual celebration or making Christmas memories with friends and family. What is at stake is the coming of the kingdom of heaven, which as Christ reminds us, is both already and not yet here.

Amen.