

Advent Sunday, 2018
Jeremiah 33: 13-16, 1 Thess 3: 9-end, Luke 21:25-36
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The Advent season is a time when we look both to the Beginning and to the End.

Traditionally, Advent Sunday marks the beginning of the church's liturgical year as we prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of the Christchild at Christmas, and for many of us, it is the start of a dizzying round of Christmas carol services and events.

Yet, during Advent, we also look ahead to the End, to an event alluded to by both Jesus and Paul, when Jesus will come with all his saints and we shall stand before him, seeing him in all his glory.

The End has, perhaps unsurprisingly, a very "final" ring to it.

Over the past couple of years, we have experienced something wholly new and disturbing, and with the emergence of the new omicron variation, we begin to worry that it is not yet over.

We are reminded constantly of the dangers posed by climate change, or collision with an asteroid, or some other form of natural disaster which will herald the potential end of the world as we know it, - much as those of us who grew up during the decades of the Cold War were inundated with images of the total destruction caused by nuclear war, portrayed in drama, song, music and poetry.

Today's Gospel reading seems to be written in the same idiom, with the roaring of the waves, the shaking of the heavens and the many signs in the heavens, causing people to faint from fear and foreboding.

It is hard in the current global climate not to see in such prophecies allusions to the worldwide sickness, global warming, or the heightened temperature of international relations, and the fear of conflict.

Yet the End, biblically speaking, is not really used in the sense of a final ending, or a full stop, or one of these global catastrophes in which we are all whirled off into outer darkness but rather in its other sense, the endpoint, or goal, the culmination of things.

"God is working his purpose out" as we sing in one of my favourite hymns, and in sending Jesus to show us a glimpse of God's face, teaching us how to live and how to love one other unselfishly and sacrificially, he has begun the process of drawing all things to their appointed goal.

The Church faces a conundrum during Advent, a time which has become a "warm-up" for the Christmas season, full of light and parties and celebrations, wonderful music and mince-pies, as the prescribed readings encourage us to preach instead about judgment and the End of the World.

It is not a message people think they want to hear!

Yet what our readings are telling us today is that the culmination of God's purposes, the final fulfilment of the wonderful salvation begun in his sending of the baby Jesus to Bethlehem 2000 years ago, is actually something towards which we are constantly moving, something to be celebrated and prepared for, a moment of truth and fulfilment and joy!

When Jesus urges, “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly”, he is not randomly condemning Christmas parties, or fun, or joy, as it may sound, but he is reminding us that our lives can be disturbingly inward-looking, so that we miss the glories of God around us.

“The worries of this life” so often seem insurmountable and overwhelming, but the idea of Jesus’ coming with his saints should not be added to the list of worries – rather, as Jesus exhorts us, it will be a time for us to “stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

The parable about the fig tree, in which Jesus says that the sprouting of the first new leaves tells us of the approach of summer, is not, I would say, a warning that all our fears in the face of pandemics and conflicts and climate change are heralding imminent disaster and judgment.

Rather, it points to the fact that all around us in the world, we can, in spite of everything, see tiny signs of hope and glory, which signal that the fulfilment of God’s Kingdom is continuing to unfold.

The Church believes that its Sacraments are precisely this – tiny signs of the Kingdom, revealing a foretaste of heaven in our earthly existence.

Bread and wine – the staples of our diet – represent for us the Body and Blood of the crucified Christ, symbols of his unconditional love for us.

As we share them around the altar, we may catch a glimpse of the kind of blessed unity we aspire to, as we kneel together, old and young, male and female, people from different nationalities and races, joined in worship as we are fed by Christ – just like those who knelt in worship around the crib in Bethlehem. Here, perhaps, we can succeed in laying aside the worries of this life, the fears which assail us, the material cravings which lead us to feel overwhelmed by envy or anxiety, and simply to experience in a sip of wine and a mouthful of bread the love of God as he feeds and inspires us.

The Advent liturgy traditionally contains frequent allusions to light coming out of darkness, as we shall see very explicitly demonstrated in the service here at 5.30 tonight when the candles are gradually lit in the darkened church.

Few of us would deny that there are times when the world, either globally speaking, or in our own personal life experience, seems very dark.

Yet the promise of Advent is that the coming of the Light was not a one-off happening in a far-off country two thousand years ago, but that signs of Christ’s salvation can be discerned around us in tiny moments of light, until the day when we shall all stand before him in his glorious Light, our joys and our weaknesses clearly revealed, and be gathered together into his merciful love.

Then the End will truly be the Beginning.