

Advent Sunday 2011127

Today is Advent Sunday. The season of Advent marks the beginning of the Christian Year, the Church's calendar of liturgical celebration. The word 'Advent' comes from the Latin for 'coming' and so this season is about Christ's coming among us. But what is really meant in that word 'coming'?

At first sight, the content of the term 'the coming of Christ' would seem to be a simple matter. Surely the beginning of the Church's calendar ought to be about the beginnings of Jesus? The Christian Year surely ought to start with the Christmas story. However, it is not that straightforward and a glance at the Lectionary or any prayer book will reveal something quite different. On the opening Sunday of Advent in all three years of the lectionary cycle the Scripture readings seem to be speaking of ends, not beginnings. The season announces itself with the fanfare of apocalypse – just listen to a few verses before today's Gospel reading began:

*... the sun will be darkened
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven
and the powers in the heavens shall be shaken.
Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds .. .' (Mark. 13:24-26;)*

Many of the Advent hymns use these same majestic images. Charles Wesley hymn '*Lo! He comes with clouds descending!*' our recessional hymn that we will sing at the end of the service is a classic example:

*Thousand, thousand saints attending,
Swell the triumph of his train;
Alleluia! Alleluia!
God appears, on earth to reign.*

*Every eye shall now behold him
Robed in dreadful majesty . . .*

This is an awesome proclamation of the return of Christ in judgement, the bliss of the just and the discomfiture of the unrighteous, resounds with the sense of impending catastrophe. It looks more as if the Christian Year is beginning with the end, the 'Last Things'.

Is it, in fact, looking more to the Day of Judgement than to the manger at Bethlehem?

To solve this apparent contradiction one must look at the weeks immediately preceding Advent in the Church's calendar, since it is with these that the opening themes of Advent have much in common. The Sundays of November also tell the story of 'the end time'. The period between the Festival of All Saints and the beginning of Advent has become a special season focusing on 'the Kingdom' in all its aspects.

From the beginning of November, we are urged to think of 'the Last Things'. The day following All Saints is observed as 'All Souls' Day', a day of remembering our Christian dead. In those places where the British way of life once dominated, the next Sunday is Remembrance Sunday with its various commemorations of those who died in wartime. In the popular religious culture of nearly all Roman Catholic countries, the month of November is dedicated to prayer for the faithful departed. Catholic Parishes organize visits to their cemetery, and people are encouraged to pray daily for their dead. In this tradition, it is clear that the faithful departed are still members of the Body of Christ, and therefore cannot be excluded from the Eucharist or from the earthly prayer of the Church.

When the reformers came along they rejected prayers for the dead. God had eternally decreed the destiny of the righteous and of the sinner, so prayer after death was not merely irrelevant but presumptuous. The effects of this have outlived the Reformation and persisted even into our own time.

The shift in thinking meant primarily that the dead suffered a sort of excommunication. The faithful departed came to be viewed no longer as fellow members of the Church who sleep in Christ, but rather as aliens, ghostly visitants and beings to be feared. The departed gradually became excluded from the active memory and work of the Church.

This may partly account for the fact of the transformation in popular culture of All Saints' Eve into 'Hallowe'en'. What should be a confident prayer to the God of salvation for the repose of departed souls has been corrupted into a preoccupation with the unearthly dead. Later on this too has been supplanted by the commercialised trivia of 'spooks' and 'things that go bump in the night'. Many Christians are concerned that this is a sign of a resurgent paganism. This may or may not be the case. What is certain is that it militates against the perfectly natural and Christian desire to pray that those we have lost may be accorded a 'place of consolation, light and peace'.

So it is that the 'Kingdom Season' and then Advent speak of the ultimate realities, in particular the coming of the 'Son of Man' as Judge. Traditional reaction to this has been fearful and apprehensive in a 'Prepare to meet thy God' mode. Though understandable this may not be the only way of looking at 'the Last Things'. It is true that the scriptures use the language of universal catastrophe and collapse, but that imagery hides a much more positive message about the purposes of God for human beings and for the whole creation.

Fundamental to this message is the ambivalence of 'judgement'. The term "judgement" carries several meanings. It implies not simply the forensic ideas of verdict and sentence but also the social and ethical themes of justice and the human qualities of maturity, common sense and discernment that are required for both.

The prophet Isaiah features prominently in Advent. His call is precisely a call for justice; his vision is that of the One who will bring justice and its companion, peace, to all nations. It is important to remember that we can translate the words of the Creed: *He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead* another way and say with equal scriptural correctness but quite different emphasis *He will come again in glory to do justice for the living and the dead*. While we are inclined to think of 'judgement' in an individualistic way, it is also necessary to think of it in terms of putting things to rights in the public domain. Isaiah called for precisely this:

*Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes;
cease to do evil, learn to do good:
seek justice, rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan, plead for the widow.* (Isaiah 1:17)

Judgement and justice are both Advent themes though in our Lectionaries, the second has rather greater prominence than the first. This is where John the Baptist is so significant. The figure of John is crucial to Advent. John's story is told on no less than two out of the four Sundays in Advent. Biblical scholars debate the relationship of John to Jesus. Were they really cousins? Whatever the truth about this was, the Gospels portray John's ministry as that of the 'Forerunner' of Christ. John is an apocalyptic figure himself calling the people to repentance before the final, fiery judgement comes. However, John insists that such repentance must take the form of deeds of justice.

But John is also portrayed as the messianic herald of Jesus of Nazareth. Indeed in Luke's Gospel John and Jesus are cousins. So John is as intimately concerned with the Birth of Jesus as he is with the revelation of Jesus as the 'One who is to come'. So, in this way, John the Baptist acts as the bridge between the Old and New Testaments, the 'hinge' on which Advent turns.

The season of Advent, in fact, has a twofold focus. The focus on the 'coming' of Christ is both on his coming at the end of time and on his human birth. These two themes are interwoven in Advent. It is a season of waiting and vigil, the time of the bridesmaids waiting for the Bridegroom, the great figures of the Old Testament waiting for the Messiah, John the Baptist waiting at the Jordan river and the young girl Mary laden with the angel's awesome promise, awaiting the birth of the child in her womb the child who is both Son of Man and Son of God. Advent draws out all these facets of the coming of Jesus, so as to reveal its nature as anticipation of the fullness of the Christmas event. The coming of Jesus is not merely about a baby in a manger but about a judge coming to judge us and Advent reminds us of this, and prepares us for both.