

Advent Sunday 2019

Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-end; Matt. 24:36-44

I wonder how many of you have put your Christmas decorations up yet?

Had your first mince pie?

I am trying to hold the line. Magic FM has been playing Christmas music non-stop since about two weeks ago, and I am refusing to listen. It is not Christmas yet. It's Advent.

Admittedly, that line is under some pressure: our first Christmas carol service will happen here tomorrow night for the Scouts, and on Thursday we'll be hosting the village Christmas lights switch on complete with carols round the tree. So it is going to feel pretty Christmassy. But make no mistake, inside, I'll be thinking it's Advent. Feeling pretty Adventy.

Well, what's the difference anyway? Surely Advent is just the season of getting ready for Christmas?

No, no, and a thousand times no. Advent is not just about getting ready for Christmas. It's not even *primarily* about getting ready for Christmas. It is about getting ready for something a lot bigger and more important even than Christmas. Scan our readings today and you'll find precious little about Christmas in them.

What will you find? You'll find first, in Isaiah, the hope of the Kingdom of God – meaning by that not some place up in the clouds where you might go when you die, but *this world* re-organised under the rule of God. They'll beat their swords into ploughshares, their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more ... they'll live together in peace and plenty and no-one shall make them afraid. That's what the Hebrew prophets hoped for. For heaven to come *here*, for God to fill the world *now*.

And these men, remember, lived through grim times: they knew what it was for foreign armies to trample over their lands and burn the temple, to be carried into exile, for kings to let you down and for hope to lie in ruins. They were realists. They didn't think things could only get better, they knew things could get a good deal worse. They didn't expect a gradual, constant improvement in things. No, they knew God's new world would have to come rushing in from above, like a flood, sweeping all before it. Let justice roll down like waters, cried Amos, and righteousness like a never failing stream. Let the earth be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

And then in Matthew, we see that that is precisely the tradition that Jesus stands in. He too is looking for that kingdom. I can't tell you when it will come, he says. All I can tell you is be ready. Don't imagine that this world you see round you now is stable, fixed, that it will always be this way. Don't organise your life as if *this* is the enduring thing. That's what they did in days of Noah, and look where it got them. No, live your life as if there is a great tidal wave of justice coming. Live your life as if God is going to come and fill everything, and you know from the prophets what that means: justice, mercy, peace, weapons tossed aside, wealth shared, lives given to each other. Any other kind of life will not last when He comes, it will just be swept away. All your wealth, all your power, all your status, it will be as chaff blown away by the wind.

Of course, if that was all Jesus had done, he would just have been another prophet – another pointer to the divine flood coming. But he was something more than that. He was the one in whom the flood actually began, the one in whom the glory of God began to flow into the world. He was, in person, the Kingdom of God. The one human life lived all the way through, at every level of his being, in perfect righteousness. He is the one in whom there is no darkness, no failure *at all*. His life is God's life, translated into flesh and blood. In a way, He is what the prophets had hoped for: the glory of God dwelling in the earth – but in a strange and largely unexpected way: as one solitary life. One brilliant point of light, splendid but alone.

Which is where we come to the mystery of the Cross and Resurrection. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, says Jesus in John's Gospel, it remains but a single grain. If it dies, it bears much fruit. So it is with the brilliant, solitary point of light. Before the Cross, but a single point. In the death and resurrection, the flood begins. The light begins to stream into the world, from the risen Jesus into the darkest places, the places of despair and death, and begins to illuminate them, to make them light.

That's the time we live in now, think Christians. Starting from the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus, the light is flowing. It flows here, sacramentally, in bread and wine; practically in how we deal with each other. The brilliant life, the life of peace and justice and mercy, the life which is Kingdom all the way through. It is of course still possible to ignore. Still possible to refuse. You can, if you wish, continue to build your life around something else. Around, say, the proposition that career is the most important thing. Or money. Or being happy, or family, or being right. It is quite possible just to keep on living like you always have done.

But one day, says the Gospel, that will no longer be possible. One day, the light will simply fill all things. One day, all things will be ablaze. You will find yourself, suddenly and unexpectedly, living in a world made new, a world made brilliant. Now that might happen when you die, and you wake up in the presence of God. Most of us can just about cope with that idea. But the Gospel asks you to believe something even bigger, wilder and deeper. It is, imaginatively, one of the hardest things for us to grasp – it certainly is for me. I struggle to make sense of it all the time. But here it is: this world is not just going to go on and on and on. Things will not always be the same. And not because of who wins or loses an election, or what we fail to do about the environment – but because in God's good time, that solitary point of light which was Jesus will erupt out of itself and fill everything. History will end. Things don't just go on and on. They *arrive*. They *end* in the brilliance of God.

And the question of Advent Sunday is: how will that be for you? How will it be for you, when the world ends in the brilliance of God? When everything stops, and there is nothing left but for your life to stand next to the light, to be seen in the light, immersed in the light? Will you be able to bear it? Or will you be shown that you have always been full of darkness – of greed, of ego, of all the things that make for war, the things the prophets always said would have to go and we never listened? Advent Sunday is a warning Sunday: is your life ready for the sun to rise? Ready to be plunged into the light?

And of course, it's not. None of us are ready. All of us, in our different ways, are creatures of the dark. We all have our secrets from each other, and even from ourselves. Even the good person, the really good person, even that person is not ready for the divine brilliance. There was one brilliant life, one life that shone with the glory of God, and that is the life of Jesus Christ. And if we creatures of the dark are to be made ready for dawn, then the only way for that to happen is what St. Paul says in our second reading, from Romans 13: cast off the works of darkness, and put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not *you* who will be able to stand in the brilliance, at least not you left to yourself, standing on your own two feet, on your own achievements and record. *You* are flawed, deep down flawed and broken. But you with the life of Jesus running in you? You, having confessed your darkness, having asked Him to live in you, having received him in baptism and communion, you fused with Him at the heart of your life? You with the brilliance already surging within, before it flashes all around? You will be ready. Put him on today, and you will be ready not just for Christmas, but for the end of all things. For you it will be homecoming. And you will meet it not cringing, not wailing, but singing 'Glory be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen'.