

Advent Sunday 2024

Jer. 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

There was a wonderful meme doing the rounds on Facebook last week. It showed a very grumpy Father Christmas, with the caption: 'there are twelve days of Christmas, and none of them is in – insert expletive here – November!'

I feel a great deal of sympathy. We fall over ourselves to focus on Christmas. Last Thursday we had the village Christmas lights switch on; yesterday we had the Friends of St. Lawrence and MU Christmas Coffee morning. Often, if Christians give any serious spiritual attention to this season of Advent at all, it's in terms of getting spiritually ready for Christmas, getting ready to do it properly, not forgetting Jesus amidst all the consumerism and mayhem of Christmas. Everything seems to be about Christmas.

If you take one lesson from this, our Advent Sunday Eucharist, let it be this: Advent is not about Christmas. Advent is not about Christmas. Advent is about something which at least viewed from one angle is even bigger and better and more glorious than Christmas. Or perhaps more accurately, it's about the whole story in which Christmas is just one episode – a key episode, a wonderful episode, but an episode nonetheless, part of a bigger thing. And the bigger and better and more glorious thing is the story of the promise Jeremiah talks about, the promise God made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah: 'In those days and at that time, I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.'

Justice and righteousness in the land... that was the great promise, and as the Old Testament prophets reflected upon it more and more their sense of the promise grew and grew. They came to understand justice and righteousness in the land as a promise not just for Judah and Israel, but as a promise for the nations – all people would come under the rule of Israel's God and Messiah, all nations would beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

Later still, battered by history, having lost so many good and faithful lives to one violent, oppressive Empire after another, they came to understand the promise as larger still: justice and righteousness not just for Israel, not just for the nations, but even for the dead. There simply would be no bit of God's creation, however gone wrong, however defeated, however lost, which would not be raised up and restored, in which God would not make his justice and righteousness happen. Resurrection from the dead, a new heaven, a new earth, all under the righteous rule of the Son of David, God's own King... that's what the big Bible-promise is. That's the story in which Christmas is but one episode. That's what Advent is about – and as Advent is the beginning of the church's year there's a great big clue that that's what *all* of this is about: every sermon, every eucharist, every church, the whole thing: it's all about the great big Bible-promise of the Kingdom coming true.

Many Christians have forgotten this. They talk as if what we hope for is to go to Heaven when we die, and that what God's concerned about is that when we're down here we keep his rules well enough: don't drink too much, and don't have sex too much. It's a miserable, shrunken retreat from the grand scale, the surging power of the biblical hope. How did we go so wrong? That's a very long story, far too long for one short sermon, but part of the answer is going to include our Gospel reading from Luke 21. 'There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, on the earth distress among the nations... they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory.' And then the really problematic verse: 'Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away till all these things have taken place.' This generation: the people standing around Jesus as he said the words. They would see all this stuff, in their lifetimes. They would see the great end of the world, the coming true of all the promises.

Except, of course, most readers say, they obviously didn't. The world still grinds on. God's kingdom has very obviously not come. So maybe Jesus was mistaken in his beliefs about the future. Or maybe he never said these things anyway, and the early Church made it all up. Either way, we're rather embarrassed by it now. So we'd like really to ignore this big biblical promise stuff, and make our religion about something else – about going to heaven when you die, or having a rich spiritual dimension to life now. The end of the world, and the coming of Jesus son of David, the righteous Branch, to execute justice and righteousness in all the earth... the instinctive reaction of many of us is to say that that kind of thing is just slightly nuts.

Well, goodness knows there have been enough nutty Christian to make that kind of reaction tempting. But the thing about temptation is that it does usually lead down the wrong path... and that's certainly so here. Take a bit more time and care reading that passage from Luke 21. It's more complicated than it seems at first. It looks like Jesus was mixing up, deliberately, two different times of judgement and righteousness, two different horizons for his disciples to watch. One of them he certainly thought was imminent, just about to happen.... the coming of the Son of Man in glory and the judgement of his enemies. And for the New Testament authors, that is precisely what happened when the crucified Jesus was raised from the dead, and when within a few decades the Temple and the mix of nationalism and religion which it stood for and which had killed him lay in smoking ruins. Judgement was indeed executed, before that generation passed away.

But there remained a still greater judgement, the one our reading ends with, which will come unexpectedly 'upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.' This is the one we are still waiting for, the one which will come, of which the end of the Temple is but a foreshadowing. It is the one when justice and righteousness will be executed in all the earth, all the living and all the dead... when God will act so that his will is done here, on earth as it is in Heaven. When all human wickedness will finally be smashed, and all its victims raised and healed. When Jesus Christ will be King not just of Christian hearts, but of *all* hearts, all life, all death, all things. To be a Christian, to live by faith, is to trust that this day is coming.

And if is, then live like it is. Be on your guard, so that you hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life. Don't waste your lives obsessing about status and wealth and how people see you. Don't fritter your time away, stuffing your mind with trivia, and entertaining yourselves to death. Life is not about achievement, and it's not about entertainment ... it is about being part of a world which one day will be subject to the judgement of God, which one sudden day will be shot through, in its entirety, with God's justice and righteousness.

How will you stand before Him on that day? Answer that, fix your heart on that, get ready for that: and then you can have a great Christmas celebration. But *first*, answer the question. That's what Advent is for.