

HOMILY FOR ADVENT II - 2020

I remember the Rector of St George's Church Goodwood in South Australia, the late Fr Frank Willoughby, preaching a thunderous Advent Sermon at Evensong and Benediction in 1970. He began by saying... There are four things that matter in life and there are four things that matter in Advent.... they are one and the same, dear people, one and the same and they are... Death and Judgement, Heaven and Hell, Death and Judgement, Heaven and Hell.

I'd never heard of the four great themes of the Advent season before and although I cannot remember anything else specific that Fr Willoughby said that evening (or any other time either), I've never forgotten what they are from that day. I think I repeated under my breath... Heaven and Hell, death and judgement, death and judgement, heaven and hell.. to myself as a sort of mantra for a few weeks afterwards.

Fr Willoughby was a staunch and convinced Anglo-catholic, if ever there was, whose great days of priesthood were spent in the Riverland at Loxton on the Murray. He was regarded there as something of a modern day apostle, he had been such a devoted and caring Parish Priest to his flock. The story was often told that if you missed Mass on Sunday in the parish of Loxton you would be visited or contacted by phone by Fr Willoughby before the ensuing week was out! Unfortunately, at Goodwood Fr Frank was dogged by poor health due to emphysema occasioned by heavy smoking - still a common part of life for many clergy back then. Nevertheless, his preaching was still usually powerful, uncompromising and arresting.

The four great themes of the short season of Advent Heaven, Hell, Death and Judgement don't get much consideration in the church of the 21st century. That's because they didn't get much attention on the latter half of the 20th century either. The triumph of a greedy, self-indulgent celebration of a secular Christmas replete with far too much in the way of food, drink, presents and parties etc has taken a great toll on what was, for the most part, up to the Second World War, a brief time of prayerful consideration of the ultimate things of life before the celebration of a profoundly

religious event – the incarnation of our beloved Saviour Jesus Christ and his humble birth at Bethlehem.

It's sad to say but Heaven has been largely reduced to a mere possibility or a pious thought. Hell is explained away as not really existing even by prominent theologians, bishops and other Christian notables.

Death is something we are unreasonably frightened of because we are so shielded from its reality and its inevitability. Nowadays it's only supposed to come after a long and happy life and even then it's supposed to come when and how we would like it to! The last eight months are clear proof of that. Judgement has been expunged in many parts of the church by the arrival of a fully liberal God in much of the church... a God who does not judge but who benignly accepts... just about anything and everything apparently.

We have arrived at a society where, for the most part, Heaven is having a good time right now. Hell is a myth that has been debunked. Death will come when and how I'd like it to, once I have decided my quality of life is not adequate any more. Judgement is something that is made by my family, friends and peers. Hopefully they'll all understand that at heart, I'm a good person!

It's no surprise that Jesus Christ has been all but removed from Christmas with that as the preamble to the secular celebration of the season. The clearest evidence of this are the 'Christmas decorations' we see in the streets and the shops and on people's houses these days. There'll be santas, stars, elves, reindeer, snow flakes, icicles, candles and tinsel aplenty but the last thing you are likely to see will be a crib scene.

What does the faithful Christian do in the face of all of this onslaught?

Let's first consider Heaven and Hell.

Belief in God necessitates belief in heaven, for Heaven is union with God. Heaven is not a place, it's a state of being and Jesus came to restore that union with God for all who place their trust in His life of perfect self-offering that reached its mystical culmination on the cross and in His resurrection.

Hell is also not a place as such, it's a state of being too... a state of being that is deliberately without God because God has been consciously rejected whether by refusal to believe or refusal to repent. Sadly, there are plenty who make this deliberate choice. A person of faith will affirm God and a person of faith will be a repentant sinner, not a self-righteous virtue signaller.

And now, Death and Judgement.

A faithful Christian realises and accepts that physical Death is not a choice. Just as we had no choice in having the gift of life bestowed upon us, death is an inevitable part of having been given the gift of life. My death is the one certainty of my life. Faithful Christians accept that and, with trust in God's goodness and plan for all things, we accept that death will come at the time of God's choosing and that there is really nothing to fear. It's a transition from the life of time to the life of eternity.

In Judgement, God is indeed merciful and loving, of that there is no doubt. Why would God have created the human race if this were not so? For if God was by nature fierce, angry and unforgiving of wrong doing there would be precisely no hope for any of us and there never would have been the incarnation of Jesus Christ. So let's keep that in mind...the judgement of God is merciful. Nevertheless, God is not mocked nor is his loving mercy something to be boldly presumed upon. Integral to a faithful life is the sincere intent to do better with God's help. We call it relying upon God's grace. With His help, sincerely sought through the saving merits of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, I can repent, I can do better and I can hope to be united with God, not just in this life but in all eternity.

These then are the Four Last things for a Christian. During the season of Advent, think about them as you are able. For most of us a regular time has simply to be found and cherished for our daily reflection, scripture reading and prayer. Let's face it, without that discipline it doesn't happen and bit by invisible bit, the secular world, with its helter-skelter busyness and all its fleeting pleasures, gnaws away at our faith until what was once a beautiful gift, the gift of faith hope and love, is a dried up shell of its former self and eventually it is turned into doubt, despair and hatred.

Jesus Christ is the key to understanding the Four Last things. He is my hope of heaven. His Cross is my escape from Hell. His Resurrection is my life in death. His Precious Blood is my Redemption in the day of Judgement.

Dear People, a beautiful Advent and Christmas is the one that is fully focused on Jesus Christ and the mystery of His incarnation, life, death and resurrection.

May God bless us all this Advent.

And now unto Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, be glory in the Church by Jesus Christ to all generations for ever and ever Amen.