

Sermon Advent 1 Year A 2022

The world about us, it seems, now hurtles into the coming month and a wave of anxiety, exhaustion, and stress. Advent, meanwhile, points us toward a time of waiting, expectation and preparation. And this is right and proper. The Gospels are replete with these exhortations, to preparation and expectation. The catch cry of this season, as we hear in the gospel today, is *Watch!* as we eagerly look for Our Lord's coming again. In Advent, then, we contemplate more intently the *two-fold* coming of Christ. His *first* coming as the babe of Bethlehem; his *second* coming when he returns as judge at the end of time. The trouble is that so often - almost exclusively now - the two-fold coming of Christ is *not* in fact our orientation or focus at Advent. Our proper and full observance is cut in half, or only half explored and so only half understood.

Attentiveness to the two-fold coming of Christ, then, will prove a remedy to all the fripperies and frivolities of Christmas that increasingly crowd into this time. Few things help put our lives into perspective more than the prospect of finality and eternity. The examples of watchfulness and expectation around Christ's first coming give us the basis to prepare for his second coming. Watching, waiting, preparing for the second coming of Christ, though, has *implications*. There are *consequences* for our life and our faith if we take this seriously. And one of the things that can help us to absorb these implications is the traditional subject of contemplation for this season, *the four last things*. For centuries, these were the staple diet of Anglicans - and for many others besides - during this time. Contemplation on the last things - Heaven, Hell, Death and Judgement - are about as unfashionable and out of step as we could imagine. But it is necessary we consider them seriously if we are going to take Advent, and the twofold coming of Christ seriously. This Advent season we will explore these together. And today just a brief reflection on heaven.

We can call the Four Last Things *ultimate realities*. What is important to keep in mind with these last things (and heaven included) is that all our concepts and images of them are provisional. What I mean by this is that because they belong to the realm of eternity (and we don't); because they are mysterious and speak to the heart of our very being and destiny - it is impossible to adequately use human words or images to describe them.

So, when it comes to understanding something like heaven, we really are struggling to find an adequate language. When describing the Eternal, our language and ideas - even good and holy ideas - will always fall short.

But an essential Christian belief is that despite the vast gap between puny, fragile and mortal human beings, and the immensity and mystery of God and of Eternity, something *can* be known. God *does* impart Godself to us. God does reveal Godself to us. This of course is why Christmas and the first coming of Christ is so important: we *see what God is like* in the person of Jesus! God *wants* to be known. He wants us to enjoy his life forever! God wants us to know him, and God wants us to know something of our ultimate destiny. Now, the Old Testament is virtually silent on any notion of heaven. There is a sense that it is the dwelling place of God (an idea Christianity of course continues) but beyond that, not much more. But in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ something of this mystery is disclosed to us.

And so, the Gospels show heaven, or more properly the kingdom of heaven (or the kingdom of God) as a central aspect of Jesus' proclamation. Trusting that Jesus does indeed reveal to us most perfectly the mysteries of the Eternal, we must look most closely at what Jesus is saying about these ultimate realities. We want to see what Jesus is saying about heaven. And the first thing we must say is that heaven is a reality for him. It is not a remote concept. It is not a vague philosophical ideal. It is not a myth for him. It is real. And, despite the difficulty to communicate what this reality actually is, we find that Jesus does use some very helpful images. We won't find Jesus saying, 'heaven is... such and such.' Or this is what heaven is...' The closest we get really is 'the kingdom of heaven is *like*... or the kingdom of God is *like*.'

As the Gospel writers present it to us, one of the favourite images to say what heaven is *like* is the banquet. This is an image of sharing, of fellowship, of welcome and hospitality. Related to this is the image of the wedding banquet. The groom coming to his bride of course speaks of unity in a very profound and intimate way. In both these core images - the banquet and of the wedding feast - Jesus conveys his sense of the kingdom of heaven as *relational*. They speak of *communion*.

This is the classic Christian understanding of what heaven is: that state of *enjoying forever perfect union with God*. The tradition calls this the *beatific vision*; the *blessed vision*. In short, Heaven is enjoying forever relationship in God's presence, 'seeing' God face to face.

But you would also be familiar with this idea of 'heaven on earth.' Jesus' own prayer suggests as much: *thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*. There is an *intersection* between the eternal and the earthly. Christian belief in heaven, then, is not simply '*pie in the sky when you die*. But, *steak on your plate while you wait!* Something of the heavenly can be known and experienced here and now. And this, in fact, is the principal role of the church: to give us all a taste of heaven now; to transform our world so it better resembles its eternal destiny. This is what lay behind the church's worship. What we do here anticipates the worship of eternity. And it is also what lay behind the church's charity, its mission, its outreach, its works of love and mercy and justice. Not just for good PR. Not just to be nice to people. But to point us toward the mercy, love and justice of eternity.

Some will think that it is enough to stop at the idea of heaven on earth; that it is enough it strive for a human Utopia; that we can create Paradise; that our efforts will be enough to satisfy all our human hopes and longings. And then at last God can be dispensed with, (which is of course what the secularist wants). God an inconvenient distraction to the noble efforts of human striving. But despite centuries of this optimism in the human endeavour, we show ourselves singularly *unable* to realise it! Despite our advancements in knowledge and education, in medicine and technology, war, inequality and violence persist. Despite our best efforts! A friend of mine says (on his reflection on the horrific experience of refugees on the Thai-Burma border) that only those who have not suffered can dispense with a belief in heaven. It is, in a way, the ultimate wrong, the ultimate injustice, to deny suffering humanity a vision of hope that is not dependent on the imperfect and deficient efforts of humankind. And Jesus Christ, in his resurrection, shows how this hope is realised in himself. God, through the resurrection of his Son, shows us the hope of our eternal destiny with him. And it is this hope that directs the shape of our lives here and now. Amen.