

Sermon Advent 1 Year B 2017

How many sighs of relief echo out after Christmas lunch the country over: 'I'm glad this happens only once a year...' It is sad that so many of us come through the other side of Christmas with a sigh of relief and a heave of exhaustion. Part of the issue we all face, of course, is that Christmas is celebrated *several times over* long before we get to the 25th of December. While we launch today into the Advent season, for all intents and purposes our context would suggest to us *this* is the Christmas season. And we can't just blame the supermarkets or the department stores. We are all complicit in this. It seems we just can't wait for Christmas to be Christmas.

Advent - this holy season we now enter - instead ought to be for us a time of waiting, expectation and preparation. And this is right and proper. We would find quite easily Gospel exhortations to those two things: preparation and expectation. The catch cry of this season, as we hear it in the Gospel today, is *stay awake*. But the *prayer* - the interior attitude we foster at this time - is *come Lord*. We sing the ancient hymn *veni, veni Emmanuel*, 'come, o come Emmanuel'. We are watching and waiting. We are expectant and prepared. And we eagerly look for our Lord's coming.

In advent, then, we orient ourselves to thinking about - and contemplating more intently - the *two-fold* coming of Christ. The two comings of Christ, of course, refer to his *first* coming as the babe of Bethlehem; the *second* coming to the return of Christ as judge at the end of time to restore all things in himself. The trouble is that so, so often - almost exclusively now - the two-fold coming 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.

The first coming (or first Advent) we can take quite easily and happily. Of course, at one level that is completely understandable. The first coming of Christ as the babe of Bethlehem is something we can relate to. We can imagine quite easily the little baby boy. It is easy to sing songs about it all.

The messages of peace, joy, love and goodwill to all is a message we can easily and happily tap into and share. And that's all good and right and proper. But the second coming of Christ (his second Advent) - with its talk of endings and judgement - to most of us most of the time, seems pretty unappealing.

But restoring a mindfulness of the two-fold coming of Christ will prove a remedy to all the fripperies and frivolities of Christmas that increasingly push their way into Advent. Because few things help put our lives into perspective - and helps restore proper balance - more than the prospect of finality and eternity. And one way we can remedy and restore the balance is to orient ourselves to contemplation of the *last things*. The four last things – heaven, hell, death and judgement - were the staple diet of Anglicans (and for many others besides) during this time. And they *do* help anchor us, or orient us, to things that are to come; they help gear our mind to that second Advent of Christ when the great mysteries of the last things will be revealed for us.

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. How do you describe the Eternal with something that is limited and infinite - such as our language and ideas, even good and holy ideas. We will always fall short.

But a critical 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, 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 Christ. God *wants* to be known. He wants us to be in relationship with him. He wants us to enjoy his life forever! God wants us to know him. It is by looking to Jesus - his first coming and his second – that we come to know our ultimate destiny. Amen.