

Reckoning (Luke 21: 25-38)*Advent 1*

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Christmas is coming! And today we embark on our four-week liturgical preparation for this feast – we embark on the season of Advent.

Yet this first week of Advent is always a challenge to preachers and no doubt congregations as well. The apocalyptic, end-times kind of vibe of the readings is for many of us cosmologically implausible and morally suspect. All that shaking of the heavens and the earth, the vision of the Son of Man coming in a cloud, the expectation of ‘that day’ which may come unexpectedly and catch you, ‘like a trap’. It’s the polar opposite, it seems, of ‘gentle, Jesus meek and mild, look upon a little child’. It’s old time revivalist religion, repenting or perishing, sandwich boards and all.

Well, if you’ve been at Benedictus in previous Advents, you’ll remember that over the years we’ve done a fair bit of ‘unpacking’ of this apocalyptic genre and the subtlety of the gospel’s use of it. We’ve noted, for example, that Jesus explicitly warns his disciples not to get too caught up in the convulsions of history as if God is their cause and meaning. These things may happen. In fact, in the verses just before our reading tonight, Jesus has referred explicitly to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. But his exhortation to his disciples is not to get unduly anxious about all this sound and fury. ‘When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified ...’. Instead, keep steady and watchful, look for and wait on what God is doing in the midst of all this. In these apocalyptic gospel passages, notions of the end, of ‘that day’ and what it means to be ready for it – all these are being subtly transposed. And we’ll come back to this point.

But first, I want reflect a little on the significance of the church's tradition of starting Advent with these readings. Why make it so hard for preachers? Why begin preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus, our loving Redeemer, with readings that speak of the violent end of history and its final reckoning?

Perhaps it's in part because we're being reminded of how to read the gospel narratives. As readers, we're constantly inclined to approach these texts as if they were newspaper reports. We read them chronologically, from Jesus's birth to his death – and in this logic it would make sense to start Advent with prophecies of Jesus's birth. But the gospel writers weren't hanging around Mary in Nazareth taking eyewitness statements. Their sense of Jesus' significance unfolded through their experience of life with him and because what his teaching and way of being, his death and resurrection showed them about themselves and about God. These experiences are what give rise to the stupendous claim that this particular human person, this Jesus, revealed and embodied God in such a way that the whole of history, the whole of creation must be related to him. Advent begins with the end of time because Christmas only matters the way it does if, at the end of all things, as the culmination of all things, Jesus is there as its meaning. In the end, is our beginning.

Ok. But what's with the forbidding tenor of this end, this culmination? Why the overtones of doom? Well, that seems connected to two thoughts. One is that the violent trajectory of world history isn't suddenly going to be turned around. Christian life is to be lived in the midst of this violence, and the important thing is not to be diverted or seduced by it. That's why we're exhorted to 'be on your guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life', so that you're capable of continuing to recognise where Christ is present, and of discerning his redeeming action in the world even as systems crumble, institutions totter and old structures of meaning fail.

For Jesus is in fact the one who shows up these systems and institutions and structures of meaning for what they really are. In this sense he is and always will be the judge of the world. Advent begins with the notion of reckoning because when Jesus is born, when he comes into the world, he reveals the criterion of God's judgement of the world. He is the measure of our lives. Preparing to meet Jesus at Christmas is inseparable from preparing for that judgement.

Which brings us back to the difficult tone of the apocalyptic genre and the question of the kind of judge Jesus is. For long periods of Christian history and in the popular imagination, the judgement of God has been conceived as a punishing, unpleasant, unreconstructed. The condemning father of childhood nightmares. This hasn't been helped, it must be said, by the way some of the New Testament metaphor and imagery has been elaborated in our tradition. Think of those mediaeval and early modern paintings of the torments of hell, the lines of those condemned to eternal damnation, the goats separated out from the sheep, the weeping and gnashing of teeth. Even today, certain kinds Christian teaching trade on this imaginative vision and the fear it engenders. No wonder the whole idea of judgement has become so problematic.

But despite the hold of these images in our cultural imagination, when we look closely at the gospel texts we find they're not so easy to sustain. After all, all the gospels insist on us remembering that it is *Jesus* who is our judge; and what decides whether you're a sheep or a goat, for example, is not some capricious whim of almighty power, but your relationship to the most vulnerable, and whether you've shown mercy to those who are hungry and thirsty, sick, naked and in prison. Yes – there's talk (in Matthew's gospel) of some being cast into 'outer darkness', and in all three synoptic gospels there's a sense in which judgement is externalised and projected into the future, as in the traditional Jewish apocalyptic imagination.

But already by the time of John's gospel, the vision of judgement has become considerably more sophisticated – it's not projected as some future event, but is

conceived as the coming of the light of Jesus' presence among us, a light that shines in the darkness. When we come into this light we discover who we really are and whether our works are worked in God. Judgement is not some dreadful future event. It's already here – we're already exposed to Christ's truthful, yet merciful gaze. The very fact that the church juxtaposes these apocalyptic texts with the feast of Christmas suggests that we're supposed to read them through this lens. The Christ who is the judge of all things, is the same Christ who comes among us vulnerable as a child, with us and for us, seeking only our healing and wholeness.

It's true his coming is a disruption, an unsettling of the status quo. It does upend systems of empire and commerce that rely on their power to wield death, to silence victims, to oppress and exploit the most vulnerable. It upends them because in the light of Christ we're less inclined to be taken in by their veneer of respectability, their claims to being 'necessary' and 'good'. Sooner or later, their death-dealing practices will be exposed, and what have seemed like fixed points of our world – the banks, the church, the political system – fall from the firmament, the 'heavens are shaken'. It's also true that the light of Christ can be experienced as painful. Not because he comes to punish, but because the truth about ourselves, our way of life, our relationships with others and with the rest of creation can be hard to face.

But the whole point of his advent is to enable our freedom from enmeshment in illusion, violence and the death-dealing mechanisms *of* the world and *within* ourselves. In this vision, judgement is itself part of our healing, part of the gift of Christmas. Because the more we can see where we're trapped by futility, the more we can own our complicity in it and our woundedness by it, the more we find ourselves released, unbound – able to stand. That's how it is that whenever we see such patterns disrupted, whenever they're overturned within and around us, whenever we sense signs of newness and life breaking through, we can take heart, we can 'raise up our heads', because that tells us that the 'kingdom of God is near'.