

## Advent Sunday 2010

Isaiah 2 vv 1-5 p686, Ps122, Romans 13 vv 11-14 p1140, Matthew 24 vv 36-44 p994

Advent is our time of preparation for the coming of Christ.

In our house we've been thinking about getting ready for Christmas, as I guess many of you have. Who's coming? How long are they staying? What food do we need to get in? When can we get to the shops? Who's bringing what?

There's also the question of presents. What would people like? Can we afford what we would like to give them? Again, when can we find the time to go to the shops?

In the week, a friend was talking about what would be the sleeping arrangements on Boxing Day at his house. Would certain people be prepared to share? Where had the camp bed got to? This led to fond reminiscences about such instruments of torture as put-u-ups and zed beds on which many of us have suffered martyrdom in the interests of yule-tide cheer. As it happened, it turned out that the camp bed in question had been lent to a film studio which had suffered a leak of dangerous chemicals with the result that everything (including the said camp bed) had had to be destroyed.

For many of us the festive season is awaited with eager anticipation, but some of us will be on tenterhooks. Will Mother-in-law look down her nose at an untidy or slightly dusty house? What if the turkey isn't properly cooked? Will guests be hypercritical of any imperfection or failure of good taste in the decorations? Is cousin Eustace still a vegetarian? How can we stop Uncle George getting drunk without him realising it? What if the children don't like Aunt Agatha's present and show it all too plainly? What if Aunt Agatha doesn't like the present I've bought her? Suppose we run out of milk! Or bread! Or wine! Or anything!

Some people may be dreading Christmas because it will be a lonely time for them. Some might be feeling guilty because they're enjoying themselves with a surfeit of good company and good things and other people are going without. And some people will be feeling guilty because they know they don't live up to other peoples' expectations of them to be party animals at a time which is supposed to be a time for non-stop partying.

In the Church too, we are preparing for Christmas. The buildings will be cleaned and decorated. The choirs will have practised their Christmas music. Readers will have prepared the lessons. The children will be rehearsing nativity plays. There will be Christingles to make, cards to deliver to every house in the parish, Christmas sermons to prepare. There is a lot of cheerful effort in preparing for the celebration of the Birth of Jesus.

Throughout the year of course Christ comes to us and throughout the year we prepare for His coming. We meet Him every Sunday in the buildings our forefathers consecrated to be "His house". He meets us as we approach Him in prayer. We encounter Jesus, the Word made flesh, as we read the Bible, God's Word written. He comes to us in Holy Communion. *Take eat; this is my Body. Drink this all of you; this is my Blood.* Jesus is with us where two or

three are gathered together in His Name, or twenty or thirty, or two or three hundred. Is He our guest in our Church? Or are we His guests in His Church?

Every week, we prepare for the coming of the Christ, as we do at Christmas, with clean and nicely decorated church buildings, with our best efforts to sing and pray and read and preach. We prepare our churches to welcome Christ as our guest. More properly, we prepare ourselves to be welcomed by Him as His guests and then as His family, as members of His household. We shower and shave and dress up when we go somewhere special or go to meet someone who really matters to us. You know what I'm going to say. So I think I'll leave it unsaid.

Jesus comes to us at Christmas – the Christ child laid in the manger. He comes to us in the fellowship of the Church. Beyond the Church, we are blind if we fail to recognise Him in the faces of our fellow human beings; we are dull of understanding if we fail to discern His presence in all the wonders of the world which He has made.

But the traditional focus of Advent is the end of time. Advent is really about what is often called the Second Coming of Christ. He came the first time to be born at Bethlehem, to show us Who God is and what it is our potential to be. He came to share our humanity, to suffer with us and for us, to set us free from sin, the world and the devil, and to make us a kingdom of priests to sing the praises of Him *Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son* – as we read in last week's epistle.

The Advent hope – the sure and certain Advent hope – is that *He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end*. This Second Coming is also often referred to as the Final Consummation or the Parousia – which means presence or arrival, especially the coming of a previously undisclosed deity. The message of today's New Testament readings is that this could happen at any time, at a time when we least expect Him, and that therefore we ought always to be ready for His Coming.

To sum up the biblical teaching, at the end of time, Christ will come again. Heaven and earth will pass away. There will be new heavens and a new earth, a new creation. The dead will rise. We shall all have to give account to God for our lives in the Last Judgment. At that Judgment, we shall be divided into sheep and goats, as a shepherd divides His flock. Those who have treated other human beings as Christ ought to be treated will go into everlasting bliss. Those who have failed to love the LORD their God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength and to love their neighbours as themselves should expect, Jesus says, *to go away into everlasting punishment*.

What saves us sinners – and we are all sinners as measured by God's standard, the only standard that finally matters – is that Jesus intercedes for us with the Father. He pleads His Death on the Cross as an atonement for the sins of the whole world. By His Death, all things are reconciled to God, things in Heaven and things in earth, the whole creation. As free agents, we human beings get to choose this salvation or to reject it, to choose whether or not

we want to be the people of God and to dwell with Him eternally. If we choose to live without God, we choose death. If we choose life, we can only do so through faith in Jesus Christ. *Repent and be baptised. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.*

As Moses said, God has set before us two ways, the way of death and the way of life. Therefore choose life.

The Advent hope for the Second Coming, then, is a bit like Christmas. We ought to await it with eager anticipation. Christ's coming is the Final Consummation. When Christ shall come in glory we shall be finally set free from the flesh with all its frailties and failures. Our communion with God will be complete and unsullied. We shall enjoy uninterrupted eternal life, which means eternal love and joy. We shall be one with God and with all the faithful. Christmas is a foretaste of that eternal life – a banquet of rich fare and fine wines, fellowship and friendship with family and neighbours, an abundance of good things, sublime worship in the presence of God and of his holy angels and of the souls of just men made perfect.

Like Christmas, however, the Advent hope of the Second Coming might lead to some apprehension. Maybe we are afraid of being left out in the outer darkness. Maybe our preparations are not thorough enough. A perfect God can no doubt find plenty of faults in our lives. Our giving of ourselves is insufficiently generous. Our repentance is not entirely sincere. Our faith is weak and flickering. We know we are not ready to meet our God, to welcome Him and that we are not fit to enter into the joy of our Lord.

But Jesus isn't like some difficult Christmas guest, determined to find fault, looking for reasons to complain. He is the God *Who desireth not the death of a sinner but rather that he should turn from his wickedness and live.* Jesus longs for us to enjoy eternal life with Him. What we have to do to prepare is just simply to *believe on the Lord Jesus, to repent and be baptised.* Give your life to Him as He gave His life for you. If you give your life to Him, you will always be ready to meet Him. When we meet Him on that great day, the last day of all days, then we shall know what it means to love, what it is to live, to live eternally with Him. We shall become what God created us to be and you can't be better than that! I have set before you two ways, a way of life and a way of death. Therefore choose life, that you may live.