

Advent 2011

~ Hope: Watchfulness while living in the End Time

1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Romans 5:1-5; Mark 13:31-37

Advent is the start of the Christian year. It marks off our days, not according to the financial year, the academic year, or even the calendar year but the year of our Lord Jesus Christ. Advent is the assertion of sacred time, time begun with God becoming one of us and marked from there by the great seasons of God's self disclosure to us – Christmas, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost.

Because of this, observing Advent is subversive of the dominant impulses of our time – consumption, self expression and autonomy. It is subversive since it reminds us of the self emptying that is the incarnation and that it is we who fit into *God's* surprising story of redemption, not God who squeezes into our story, driven, as it is, by felt need and skewed desire.

Our Gospel reading today is about the necessity for expectant watchfulness. Our New Testament readings link this watchfulness with the need for endurance while longing for God's manifest presence, the practice of '*active waiting*' this requires. All this, asserts Paul, is based on the grace extended to us in Jesus the Christ.

When long before the prophet Isaiah cried,

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
[O God] so that the mountains would quake at your
presence”,¹

he invoked the Sinai experience where a framework is given for the wandering Hebrews to become God's people. These were the same people who endured the servitude and oppression of Egypt and who now waited for deliverance from exile in Babylon, from where the prophet wrote:

¹ Is.64:1.

From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who *wait* for him.²

The Jews did return from exile and they did rebuild their desolated city and temple. Yet by Jesus' time they still longed for their full liberation and they longed for the one who would lead them to it.

It was this tradition of *expectant* waiting which was drawn on by Paul when he wrote to the Corinthian Christians, as we heard today:

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him... so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you *wait* for the *revealing* of our Lord Jesus Christ.³

Similarly, our reading from Mark's Gospel draws on Jewish apocalyptic imagery to call God's people to that active waiting he calls '*watchfulness*'. The passage, like those just preceding it, is couched in the language of Jewish prophecy and apocalyptic⁴ from which Christians derive central concepts such as 'the kingdom of God', 'Messianic age' and 'Son of Man', 'deliverance' and 'salvation', 'resurrection', the 'day of judgement', and so on.

Moreover, in an echo of the opening chapters of the Genesis story, and, as we heard in his earlier chapters in his letter to the Romans, Paul links these ideas to suffering and travail within the *whole of creation*, not just to the people of God.⁵

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² Is.64:4.

³ 1 Cor. 1:3-9.

⁴ c.f. Jer.3:16, 18; 31:29; 33:15-16; Jol.3:1; Zech.8:23; Is.13:10, Is.24:23; 34:4; Ez.32:7-8; Jol. 2:10, 30-31; 3:15; Am.8:9; Dan.7:13.

⁵ Rom.8:18-25.

But as one commentator asks,

“What are we to make of the apocalyptic imagery of Mark 13? What do all these words and phrases mean? It is easy enough to point out the OT roots and Jewish parallels to individual phrases and motifs. It is more difficult to say what these phrases and motifs meant for Mark and might mean for people today.

The basic problem is that the kingdom of God is a *divine* future, and *transcendent* entity. It is *God’s* kingdom to bring... Though it has been inaugurated in Jesus’ life and ministry, its fullness remains in the future. And it is transcendent in that, as a divine and future entity, it goes beyond the limits of human thought and speech.

In talking about the fullness of God’s kingdom, then, one is forced to use imaginative language.”⁶

How, then, do we give this *imaginative* language a body, as it were? How to we make it concrete? It is helpful, I think, to say first what we don’t do...

There are two temptations that we face as followers of Jesus in the second decade of the third millennium; they are the same temptations which early disciples and disciples of every age since have always faced: we are tempted to *disbelief*, and we are tempted to lose *hope*.

A couple of weeks ago I spoke of a need for a renewal of our society, of the necessity of a Gospel lived that bears witness to a new way to seeing things, a renewed moral vision. And I spoke of how people longed for such a renewal.

Today I want to focus especially upon hope in such times. I want to lay the ground-work, as it were, in order to come back to thinking about hope again next week.

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⁶ Reference lost. Possibly Richard Bauckham? TBC.

There were 400 years between the last prophecies of Malachi⁷ and the first advent of Christ. That's a long time for a people to hang on to a belief in a righteous and compassionate God who will vindicate his purposes by establishing a reign of justice and peace throughout creation.

The sacking of Jerusalem and dragging into exile in Babylon was a disaster for Judah of catastrophic proportions. Israel had, of course, long since gone. Now those from Judah, the Jews, as they became known, had to rediscover God. Who was this God and why had he let this national calamity befall them? Could God be trusted, or even believed in, since the God's of the Babylonians, Assyrians, Greeks and Romans in turn, all seemed more powerful. By Jesus' time, despite the rebuilding of the temple, these questions had not been settled. The Jewish people still felt orphaned and bewildered at their uncertain and scary future.

Our own nightmares are different but just as frightening and bewildering: the threatened collapse of global capitalism, the AIDS pandemic, the threat of other viruses periodically sweeping the globe, impending crises around the availability and distribution of oil, the possibility of nuclear war in the Middle East, water shortages, ozone depletion, melting icecaps and permafrost, severe depletion of rainforests, fish stocks and biodiversity, not to speak of acid rain, monoxide pollution, disposal of nuclear waste, local and region conflicts, global terrorism, the yawning gap between the world's rich and poor and no less than the appalling famine in the horn of Africa. The only question seems to be, "will the ice cap drown us all or will we burn, starve or be poisoned?" We long for hope even as our children's future diminishes with each new failed UN initiative.

For many, the post-modern shrug is all that is left. "They'll think of something, I've got to get to NewWorld before the Christmas sale ends." Or, if you're into an alternative consumerism, individualised spirituality and the "personal growth" boom, can also provide escape from the pessimistic scenarios of our news broadcasts and the internet. When all

⁷ Mal.4:1-5.

else fails self cultivation and the gymnasium help us get through difficult and stressful times.

For others, hope lies in pragmatic policies and technocratic solutions. Religion provides no solution to the pressing problems of our day. Passages like today's Gospel give such vague and unspecific signals that the language, though maybe evocative, is of little use. For any 'urgency creating rhetoric' to be widely credible in the 21st century, it must be factual – witness the fierce debate, some would say smoke screen, in and around the discussion on whether global warming is pessimistic scaremongering, or for real, or if so, has any human origin.

Advent calls us to reject all this – to reject false optimism and false pessimism, romanticism and despair alike. Instead, Advent calls us to repentance and hope by reminding us not just of God becoming human in the Christ child – God manifesting his presence among us in Jesus; but the “*coming Day*” when God's presence will cover earth as the waters of the sea.⁸ It is part of our human condition that we do not know when this Day will be, or even what it will look like exactly, just as Jesus our brother, also didn't know “but only the Father”.⁹ But, none-the-less, the day *will* come and we *will* recognise it has arrived. This, Jesus tells us, is for certain.

Traditionally, Advent has been a season of fasting as we wait for this Day, for this decisive hour. The Advent fast is one of repentance from disbelief, for it is in faith – “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen”¹⁰ – faith in absent but coming Jesus Christ, that we find hope.

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Yet the close cousin of hope is belief. Belief that our hope is credible and true – themes, you may recall, I have spoken on in recent weeks. I was listening on my car radio (as you do), to the Blind Boys of Alabama singing the traditional “Jesus, gonna be here, be here real soon...” And I found myself thinking, “Is he? Is he *really*? Do we really *believe* this?”

⁸ Hab.2:14.

⁹ Mk.13:32.

¹⁰ Heb.11:1.

This last week I was reading a book by Church Growth guru and commentator, Eddie Gibbs. In a particularly telling and poignant introduction he writes:

“I was ordained into the ministry of the Church of England 36 years ago... Looking back to those formative years I realize that I have been trained for a world that has changed beyond all recognition, not just in terms of technological progress but in cultural climate.

Many of these changes have overwhelmed local churches with the force of alpine avalanches. Church buildings are derelict or have been converted to other uses. Others are maintained but now house ever-dwindling and aging congregations. It is sad and painful to go past these monuments to faithful ministry that did not have the ... missional insights and experience to engage a society in [radical change].

The church in which my wife and I came to a personal faith in Christ and that had a wide reputation for being faithful to the gospel, for being committed to evangelism and for having a dynamic youth ministry has now been amalgamated with another parish. The church building has been converted into apartments for the elderly... Given the changing demographics [and swirling social and cultural currents of our time], was its future made inevitably untenable?”¹¹

Eddie Gibbs sad lament stands in stark contrast to the experience of the church in the two thirds world. Though, like any human enterprise, it has its challenges, church is booming even while they too deal with the impact of globalised culture and capitalism, and the impact of environmental disaster. This begs the question: “why the difference?

Since our return from East Africa some 20 years ago people have continued to ask Kirsty and me this very question: “what is it that

¹¹ Eddie Gibbs, *Church Next ~ Quantum changes in how we do ministry*, IVP 2000. P.9-10.

characterises the East African church? What’s the secret of its incredible growth and vibrancy?” From what I have seen then and on my return trip in 2006, the answer is obvious: non-Western Christians believe the Gospel is true and so stake their lives on it. Moreover, they know they have everything to gain and nothing to lose by doing so.

We in the Western church, on the other hand, with lots to lose if we make a slip (and I’m talking here about our self image as much as our material well-being), can’t bring ourselves to risk our all on the hope of Jesus’ immanent return and what this might mean for how we live now.

And so we hedge; we qualify our faith in all sorts of ways to the point where it seems we believe little – little that motivates us to make a difference in any case. We simply can’t understand or believe readings such as today’s Gospel in any plain sense of the text. To do so would result in our being regarded as some sort of loony, that terrible creature – the “fundamentalist”. What historically has passed for orthodoxy is now untenable in any sense that is empowering.

Yes, the language of faith is metaphor but language spoken in a vacuum makes no sound. Lack of belief leads to lack of true religion¹² – that is, a religion that actively witnesses to God’s justice for the whole of creation even while it waits for God to do it; a religion that proclaims and practices grace and forgiveness, but above all, a religion that gives empowerment through hope – hope in the one who came to us, remains with us by his Spirit and will come again in glory. Our calling is to hopeful, expectant watchfulness. The kingdom of God is God’s to bring, just as it is ours to pray and work for.

More on this next week...

Let us pray...

¹² Jms.1:27.

Rend the heavens and come down,
O God of all ages!
Rouse us from sleep,
deliver us from our heedless ways
and form us into a watchful people,
that, at the advent of your Son
he may find us doing what is right,
mindful of all you command.
Grant this through the one whose coming is certain
whose day draws near:
your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit
God for ever and ever, Amen!