

Advent 1A.  
Peter's Box Hill  
Matthew

St

December 2, 2007

---

---

## PREPARING THE WAY OF THE LORD

---

---

Mark Twain once wrote a story called "The Terrible Catastrophe". It concerns a group of people who get trapped in a tragic situation. They are doomed to die and have no way of escape; and they are indeed on the verge of a terrible catastrophe.

Mark Twain didn't want the story to end unhappily, but he did not see how he could save the people. It was like having them trapped in a plane that was seconds away from crashing into a mountainside.

And so Mark Twain concluded his story with these two sentences. "I have these characters in such a fix that I cannot get them out of it. Anyone who thinks he can, is welcome to try."

That is a profound social commentary. The "fix" that many people experience in our world can seem remote from life in Box Hill. For example my son works in an executive position in Overseas Aid in the Middle East & Europe. Recently he spoke of meeting with many Iraqi refugees in Jordan – many of them Christians – and their plight in a desperate situation – It's worth remembering that by Christmas just under one million children will die in our world because of poverty that could easily be eradicated. One child dies every 2.5 seconds. Since I commenced this dreadful sentence four children have died in this way.

It is all too easy to make a deadly catalogue of human need, poverty, oppression and injustice where so many people are in a fix. We can add the personal "fixes" of dysfunctional relationships and families, and perhaps in lives that are present in this church this morning.

Then we hear the Advent Scriptures read this morning speaking of newness, justice, hope and promise because of the advent or coming of Jesus Christ.

It is important to recall that what the Church is waiting for on Advent Sunday is not so much Christmas Day but the Second or Final Coming of Jesus Christ. In one sense the baby born in Bethlehem fulfils the promises of the Old Testament Scriptures ; but in another sense, the baby becomes a promise of something more, the coming of the Son of Man at an unexpected hour.

We no longer await the baby's birth, we await his return, his coming as the Lord of Heaven and earth, as the King and Judge who renders judgement and sets right all that is twisted and distorted.

Sometimes the big picture of Advent season can be so overwhelming that we find it difficult to relate our little world. Does Advent season mean that we just sit back and wait for God to act or does it make demands upon our lives? This is a key issue that confronts us on this Advent Sunday. Each of the Scripture readings explode with the hope of a day of the Lord which will transform human relationships, initiate justice and peace and result in a new world. How are we to understand this faith?

#### (1) HOW DO WE WAIT IN HOPE?

The gospel reading from Matthew is part of a long section of that gospel which uses symbols and pictures to speak of the coming of God's kingdom in its fullness - the return of Jesus Christ.

The gospel set for today begins and ends with the declaration that the hour of the Son of Man's coming is unknown.

"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son - only the Father."

and concludes with the words

"therefore you must also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour"

The fact that even Jesus and the angels are not privy to the time of the second advent provides a sharp warning against speculation and an over eagerness to read the signs of the times. In fact any claim to special insight about the future merely exposes human arrogance and pretence.

It is not a matter of cracking a secret code which will describe all the events of the end times. We are called to be agnostics about the time of Jesus return. We simply do not know.

What we do know however, is what we the Church are supposed to be doing in the meantime. Because we do not know the day or the hour, we are always to be "ready."

In the context of Matthew's gospel that means doing deeds of mercy, forgiveness and peace that are the signs of kingdom people. Throughout Christian history there have always been groups who were convinced that they knew when the world would end; some on occasion would quit their jobs and wait with eager anticipation for Christ's return. In Matthew's understanding of the Church, the second coming does not cause us to quit the task of being the church in the world; rather, it calls us to take them up with an even greater urgency.

Part of the dilemma for some Christians has been an inadequate understanding of the second or final coming.

They seem to have the view that after Jesus came the first time he died, rose again and returned to heaven and will come again at the end of time. As a consequence they are opposed to any ministries of social justice or care of the earth, because; "After all Christ is coming again and this earth will matter no longer."

Such views are in blatant contradiction of the great Advent and Christmas theme " that God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son." and diminish the importance of this world as the creation of God.

They need to read again the first reading from Isaiah that describes the "day of the Lord" as a day of justice, peace, disarmament and human potential for all people not just the one third of the world like ourselves.

## (2) WHO ARE WE WAITING FOR?

There is a powerful story couched in somewhat old fashioned language which to me expresses this understanding of the Final Coming or Second Advent. I quote from an older book of theology which uses the language of fifty years ago; yet it is accurate in its understanding.

"Perhaps we may come nearest to essential truth about the matter by a simple human parable. Imagine a fevered little child in bed, in a darkened room. Now try to describe that little child's world. There are the aching limbs, the throbbing head, the pillows and the bedclothes; strange shadows in the darkened room cast by a flickering fire or perhaps a hidden night light; dim shadows of furniture and pictures on the wall; and outside , black night and the infinite unknown. That and that only is the child's world where the most innocent shapes have become distorted by the gloom. The child becomes restless and disturbed," MUM, MUM." And then suddenly a new and sudden thing happens. A bedlight next to the bed is switched on and the child discovers that Mum has been sitting there all the time.

The shadows vanish, the dim and distorted shapes disappear, and there, sitting , watching all the time has been Mum. She has never really gone away, but the child's first thought is " she has come." And with her coming all things have become new. That little child is our humanity, fevered and ill at ease, conscious only of dim shadows and flickering lights, of mystery and unintelligible pain, of homelessness and night. And then something happens, something for which we mortals have no name - and we become aware of things unseen, of spirit, love' reality and GOD. We say or sing " Lo He comes with cloud descending." But he has never really gone away. He has been there all the time, for Christ is never an absentee."

(T. F. Glasson, His Appearing and His Coming Epworth Press, 1953. page 201.)

Jesus Christ is always the coming one.

He came to his people at Bethlehem to show us who God is, what God is like and what we might become.

He came on the day of Pentecost to keep his promise to the disciples " Lo I am with you always even to the end of time" and he still comes to us through his Holy Spirit.

He has come in the events of history and of human experience, He comes to us in the needs and agony of others; He comes to us in this sacrament of Holy Communion; through the Scriptures and our prayers.

He comes to us through the community of other believers.

He comes to us in our times of anguish and distress and at death to guide us to our eternal home; and He will come at the end of human history.

Advent is the celebration of all these comings and calls us to live this day as though this was the day of Christ's coming. For in some way whether in our own experience of life or in the needs of others he is knocking at the very door of our existence and life. He is coming.

In fact it may well be that it is as we know him now and recognise his coming now that we will be ready and prepared to welcome him at the end of time.

Out of the expectancy and promise of this season we are given the energy and hope to seek to respond to the human "fix" in our world and in the lives of people we know.

-

### (3 )WHAT IS AN ADVENT RESPONSE?

How can we make a difference to the problems of our world?

The love and hope of God can spread through God's people to influence and transform our areas of life and work. Our prayers, gifts of money, practical help and solidarity with the poor, the victimised, the marginalised and the exploited help to establish the kingdom of God by changing the circumstances.

An Advent response is obviously more than the Christmas Bowl Appeal, but for many that may be a good place to start. For sadly there is the temptation to allow Advent to be subsumed under the frenzy of Christmas preparations of gifts and parties.

Don't get me wrong. I enjoy Christmas celebrations , gifts and parties. But a feast without justice, sharing with others is not the feast to which God invites us.

-7-

An Advent response not only impacts upon our response to the material needs of others but also their personal and emotional needs. It is an invitation to discern and to

respond to others.

However watching and waiting are not always easy, precisely because other things do interfere. Provisions for family, difficulties relating to work, concerns about the affairs of government - things both worthy and things trivial have a way of clouding the vision so that the coming kingdom of God often remains somehow out of sight.

The film "The Titanic" recaptures something of the horror and folly of the sinking of that great ship. Quite literally some of the stewards were literally rearranging the deckchairs and ignoring the wailing sirens of a sinking ship. Advent Sunday warns us of the folly of being so caught up with the immediate that we forget the purpose of living and forget the God who gives us life and whose advent offers the way out of the human "fix".

So it is not a time to wring our hands in desperation, but a time to join our hands in a common task, to fold our hands in prayer, to reach out our hands to others both within this community and in our world. These are ways in which we can be ready for the "Son of Man who is coming at an unexpected hour:"

In a short time we will also reach out our hands to receive bread and wine. This simple act is also a sign of the coming of Christ to us. As with all the comings of Jesus we shall then find that "to have found God is not an end in itself but a beginning."

Bishop George Hearn