

## **Advent Sunday 30 November 2008**

We have now come to the beginning of the church year again. This is the Church's New Year's Day as it were. Lots of things change. To begin with, the liturgical colour is now purple. This is the colour we use in times of preparation, in times of journeying and times of growth. We have a new Advent Star which is a symbol of the hope of a new dawn, and a reminder that being a people of faith means being on a journey guided by the light of Christ. As this is the first Sunday in Advent, we also notice that the gospel readings now come from a different gospel. We hear now the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ as Mark tells it.

But, now that Advent has arrived, we turn our attention to think about the ways God has come and is coming to us to free us and transform us. We are beginning again to rehearse the story of the coming of Our Lord, not only as a human being like us born of Mary; but as the One who continues to come to us every day to free us from all that enslaves.

One of the key themes of Advent is that of waiting. Waiting is something we do so little of. Consumerism has gone completely mad and we face massive advertising for Christmas. Most Christians have succumbed to all this and we allow ourselves to be carried along by a consumerist culture that would have us celebrating Christmas almost from the end of October onwards. Nowadays there is hardly any time for us to wait, to savour things, and to reflect on the state of our souls, which is what Advent is all about.

All the gospels indicate God expects us to learn the value of patient waiting. We are called to prepare ourselves for the coming God, to ensure our lives and our relationships are in order. When you think about it, waiting makes sense. When we have to wait for something we really treasure, we are more aware of what really is worth waiting for and what is of real value to us. Waiting builds anticipation. We watch carefully for when it might be coming. When we have to wait like that, we prepare ourselves for its coming, and we are ready to pounce when it comes, and we treasure it with all our hearts.

So it is with God. In Advent we look and wait for the coming of Christ into our lives and into our world. We do everything we can to be ready. We soak ourselves in prayer like taking a deep bath,

we study the scriptures, we care for the hungry and the sick and the stranger and look for the signs of God's work so that we can recognise them when we see them and rejoice with new hope. If you are a busy person chasing your tail in the run up to Christmas, why not pause and ask why we allow this happen every year? Make time for reflection and quiet so that when Christmas comes there is energy left to actually enjoy it.

That brings me to the next theme in the text before us today: Watching. In the gospel today Jesus tells us to stay awake and alert. Watching requires that we take time to reflect on the events of our life; both past, present and future. Spiritual directors and people trained to help people pray encourage exercises that help us to be more observant. One famous Jesuit priest of recent times, Anthony De Mello, has a book of spiritual exercises that help folk to relax their bodies and release anxiety and nervous tension, because if we are unable to relax and be utterly present in the here and now, we can't truly be attentive to God. He talks about the importance of silence, and reviewing with God the things we have done and the conversations we have had. That way we allow God to reveal his way of seeing things to us. With the Spirit helping us see more clearly, God reveals opportunities we might otherwise miss, shows us how He is moving and working in our lives, and opens our hearts to the ways he is coming to us. In Advent, we hear God's call to be alert and watchful.

Finally, in Advent, we strain forward in hope looking for the final in-breaking of God's reign. The scripture readings at this time of the year are tinged with themes of judgement. Most of us think of Advent as a season of preparation for Christmas. But Advent is equally about preparing for the second coming of Christ. So Advent is intended to be a season in which we think about the state of our world and the state of our souls. Behind these shrill sounds of judgement is God's vision of the world as it could be. A modern example of such speech is the Martin Luther King, "I dream a dream" speech given in Washington in the 1960s. The dream was inspiring but it named the issues God was concerned about. The judgement passages in the scriptures offer God's dream for a better world, a place where all people are valued, where everyone counts as somebody, where all people have access to adequate food, water and shelter, where injustices are put right. If you want to get involved with God in putting the world to right, here's two ways you can go about it. The first is to support the CWS Christmas appeal. Your money goes to relieving suffering in places like Darfur and East Timor; to the provision of water in communities that lack safe water to drink; to feeding people who are starving to death in places like Zimbabwe. A second thing you can do is review your gift giving this Christmas. Bishop Victoria in Anglican Action asks why give from our plenty

to others who also have much? Instead, give to those who have little, maybe through the City Mission. Invite someone who is lonely to your home on Christmas Day. Remember to teach your children the joy of being givers as well as receivers.

All of us have a deep need for God and for the future God offers. In Advent we hear again the call to be alert, because as surely as we search for God, God is searching for us. God is coming to liberate us and free us. It may be that liberation is freedom from the prison of loneliness, despair, broken relationships or pain that disables us whether physical or not; liberation may be empowerment to be the person God created us to be. God is coming to free us now. We look forward to that day when God will finally remove every tear from our eyes.

So in Advent, and all through the coming year, we watch and wait in hope. We constantly anticipate and prepare for the coming of Christ into our lives, knowing that no matter who we are, or what we have done, we have already been accepted by God, and we are already in relationship with him. Advent reminds us to take time out to watch, to pray, to make space for waiting which is so important for our spiritual journey, and to look to tomorrow in positive hope, living expectantly for the coming of Christ. May your Advent be blessed by the God of our salvation.