

Advent Sunday 2016

The word "Advent," of course, means "coming." So in Advent we celebrate the various comings of Jesus, the Word incarnate and God on earth. We commemorate his coming at Bethlehem two thousand years ago, his Second Coming at the end of the world, and his coming to us in time in our baptism and in the reception of his sacraments, such as the Holy Eucharist. The Church urges us to open our hearts to receive him with faith, hope and love.

Coming results in a certain presence, a more intimate presence, since he is already present in our hearts by his grace. Just as we prepare for guests who come for dinner so the Church bids us prepare in a special way for the coming of Christ at Christmas time. By doing this, we prepare ourselves for his final coming—first at our death and then at his Second Coming at the end of the world.

The Old Testament prophets looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, the Anointed of the Lord, the Great King. Isaiah prophesies that the Lord will impose peace on many peoples. There shall be no more war and preparing for war: "Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!"; that is, we must obey the Lord, believe in him and practice virtue. This applies first of all to the faithful who have the peace of Christ in their hearts. It does not refer to any historical time, to any earthly utopia. Because of original sin and man's inclination to evil, there will always be wars and rumours of wars until the final coming of Jesus on the last day. Isaiah reminds us of:

"The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain."

Like you, I am very sorry that Robert has decided to retire at the end of January. He appointed me to this post and I have enjoyed working with him.

The impending inter- regnum and the start of a new church year got me thinking about a number of issues that we must think about as a congregation.

We will be asked to contribute to the writing of a parish profile and in order to do that we will have to look at the way in which St Mary's is run and the way in which we are doing our business. We need to look closely at all aspects of our church life and be ready when the time to make an appointment comes

The gospel reading from Matthew is all about being ready, because we don't know when that time will come. Matthew, too, looks toward the future, looking to the day of the final coming of the Son of Man, a coming which speaks both of salvation and of judgment. But in Matthew, Jesus' concern is that we be ready, that we not be caught napping. It's important to say that Jesus' concern is not that we figure out when this day is coming. Jesus in essence says, "I don't even know that," a statement so shocking that scribes who were making later copies of the New Testament took that line out. But the date is not the issue. What is critical is that we live every day in readiness. So what does that mean? Does it mean we sell everything? Does it mean it's wrong to go about our everyday lives? The short answer, of course, is no. But beyond that, we need to back up and see something very basic about the Christian faith.

One of the most fundamental realities of our Christian experience is that we live in the tension between the "already" and the "not yet." Our salvation is already assured, but it is not yet fulfilled. The ultimate direction of history is already set, but it has not yet reached its end. We live in hope now but the fulfilment of that hope is still in the future. We live between the already and the not yet. The question, then, is how we are to live in this position. Do we focus all of our attention on what has already been done? At the other extreme, we can focus heavily on the "not yet" side of things. We can get wrapped up in trying to figure out when Christ will come again. We can buy all the books and memorize all the charts and go to all the seminars. And we risk saying essentially, "This world doesn't matter. It's all going to end anyway, and probably really soon, so why worry about changing anything here." And as someone has said, we become so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good. We live in the tension between the already and the not yet. But if we grab only one of those and forget the other, we can get into trouble.

We who claim to follow Jesus are here to be a living, breathing demonstration of the kind of humanity, the kind of community God wants for all people. A part of that is individual. A large part of that has to do with our life together. We are called to give people a glimpse of what God's dream for the future will look like. Are we there yet? No, we're not. We're not at the point where this dream is fulfilled. But we're also not there yet in living out our calling. In a sense, of course, we'll never be "there yet" in this life. We'll never fully live up to God's dream for us as individuals or us as people in community.

But we have a two-part task. The first part is to keep God's dream, God's vision, God's way in front of us and not to dismiss it or minimize it. It is the vision of what Jesus called "the kingdom of God," and it was the vision that drove Jesus throughout his ministry. Being clear about that vision and keeping it in front of our eyes is the first task. And the second task is to begin making that vision a reality, in our lives, in community with each other, in the way we treat everyone around us, in the way we see the world. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." God's kingdom, God's way comes wherever God's will is being done. Wherever we are reflecting the character of this God of shalom, of peace, of reconciliation, we are doing the work of the kingdom. So on this first Sunday of Advent, we have much to anticipate. God's dream has not yet become the reality that it will one day.

As we celebrate the hope we have in Jesus Christ, may we indeed now be a sign of hope to those around us. God grant that it may be so. AMEN.