

Preaching Through Advent

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"A four week period in which the church joyfully remembers the coming of Christ and eagerly looks forward to His coming again." That is how the *Worshipbook* describes Advent and it underlines the two great Advent themes, the coming of Christ into history and his coming again.

Christmas is, of course, the most popular of all the church festivals or celebrations. The reason being, I believe, that people can celebrate it without in any way feeling challenged or threatened by it. Once a year they can soak themselves, for a little, in what is very dear and familiar to them, the old carols, customs, and rites. All of which is very nice and heartwarming but it can also be very dangerous if this obscures the Advent of God in Jesus Christ, hides what the coming of God means for us and for our world!

Christmas is, in many ways, a much more dangerous festival than Easter to celebrate because it is so much easier to domesticate it. You really cannot destroy the awe and the terror and the splendour of the Resurrection—cannot domesticate it, but it is all too easy to turn Christmas into a nice, cosy, sentimental occasion and this we must not do. We must not make God into a baby and tie him up in a cradle so that we need no longer listen to his insistent demands upon us. Yet sometimes it seems this is precisely what we do! If we look at the lessons which the Lectionary prescribes for the four Sundays in Advent one thing is very clear, they do not add a single candle or yule-tide log to our scheme of decorations. On the contrary, their emphasis is of a very different kind from that with which so many of our people associate this season, for they call upon us to prepare joyfully to celebrate the coming of God in Christ into the world and they summon us to remembrance that he will come again. My purpose here is to look at some of the themes which are, as it were, subsumed under these two major themes.

1. Note how many of the Old Testament readings stress the Advent hope, the longing for the fulfillment of the promise of God that he will visit his people to redeem them. "O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down" (Isaiah 64:1). It's all there in the cry of this man that the mighty, inaccessible, unapproachable God will come down to deliver his people, to overthrow evil and establish peace and righteousness and justice. But we dare not leave it at that. The cry of Isaiah finds its echo in the hearts of millions today as they look around the world in which they live or as they struggle with their own personal problems and their own personal sin. The message of the Incarnation is that he has come down. Christ is the fulfillment of the Advent hope. This for the preacher is the opportunity to set the incarnation in its place within the whole sweep of the world's history as the fulfillment of everything that has gone before and the meaning of everything that will come after. It took God all the millennia of time to prepare the coming of Christ: from the act of creation

through the call of Abraham; the selection of Moses; the separating out of the chosen people and their strange, twisted, tortured history with its tragedies and triumphs, successes and failures, seeming disasters which proved not to be disasters at all, and seeming victories which turned out to be the most monumental defeats—all of it culminating in the coming of Christ. This is the focal point, the watershed of history. Everything prior to it is “Before Christ” and everything after it is in “the Year of the Lord.”

2. Note how secular, social, political is the nature of the salvation for which the prophets hope and wait. It has to do with righteousness and peace and justice and freedom, with the conquest of poverty and the ending of bondage. When we preach on these passages we have to ask whether these were mistaken hopes, whether Christ rejected these aspirations or whether we have conveniently “spiritualized” them and in so doing have drawn the claws of the Lion of Judah and filed his teeth!

In this connection, it is to be remembered that the disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus with the question “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” He said “Go and tell John what you hear and see; the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them” (Matt. 11:3-5). So what does it mean “the poor have the good news preached to them”? All the others are given what they need, the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised. What does good news to the poor mean if it does not have something to do with their being no longer poor? And what are we to make of Mary’s words, “He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away”?

There are, it seems to me, social and political implications which we cannot ignore if we are to handle the Scriptures with integrity. We may be accused of meddling in politics if we speak about these things. We shall be handling the Word deceitfully if we fail to speak about them. God, it seems, keeps meddling in the affairs of the world. What could be more meddlesome than sending his Son?

3. A third question which we are called to address in this season of Advent is that of the disciples of John the Baptist, to which reference has already been made: “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

To the Christian the Jew is a stubborn fellow who is still waiting for the Messiah; to the Jew, the Christian is a heedless fellow, who, in an unredeemed world, declares that redemption has already somehow taken place.

Thus wrote Martin Buber, one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of our time and one of those most sympathetic to the Christian religion, and he goes on to spell out why the Jew cannot accept that the Messiah has come in Jesus Christ:

Standing bound and shackled in the pillory of mankind we demonstrate

with the bloody body of our people the unredeemedness of the world.

How is it possible to claim that the Redeemer has come when the world is so clearly unredeemed? In the light of Jewish history since the coming of Jesus, it is surely not hard to understand their difficulty about accepting that he was the promised Messiah. "Standing bound and shackled in the pillory of mankind," is it not true to say that the Jews "demonstrate with the bloody body of their people the unredeemedness of the world"?

It would be naive to imagine that this difficulty is confined to the Jews. If God has visited the world in Christ to redeem it, as the Christian religion claims, then why is it still so obviously unredeemed? Why do we still live under the shadow of war? Why are there millions dying of hunger? Why is there still hatred, cruelty, injustice, and oppression and why are they still so apparently successful? Why in the words of the Psalmist "Do the heathen rage and the nations imagine a vain thing?" To bring it down to a more personal level: if God in Christ has brought salvation then why are sorrow, suffering, and tragedy still woven so inextricably into the pattern of human existence? To be even more personal: if I have been redeemed, why am I still so unredeemed, so far from being what a redeemed person ought to be? Has the Redeemer come or should we still be looking for his coming and looking elsewhere?

Languishing in Herod's prison, John was desperately anxious to know the answer to this question. He had hailed Jesus as the Promised One of whom he was but the forerunner, the herald. Now he was not sure any longer.

Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I. . . . he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

(Matthew 3:10-12)

This was the kind of thing John had said about Jesus and it did not seem to be happening. Where was the axe which would bring down the pride of rulers? Where was the fire which would scorch and blast and burn out what John had called "this generation of vipers"? Perhaps to John it all seemed too slow, too mild, too peaceful—let's face it, too weak! So he sent his followers to ask this blunt, uncompromising question: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Jesus did not give a direct answer. He said "Go and tell John what you hear and see; the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up and the poor have the good news preached to them and blessed is he who takes no offence at me."

In effect he was asking John to think again about what God's kingdom means and how it is to come and what are to be the signs of it in the world. The words he used to describe what was happening as the result of his ministry were chosen so that John was bound to hear in them the echo of Isaiah's

vision of the kingdom of God:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy.

(Isaiah 35:5,6)

It is important to note that Jesus was not saying what simplistically we often tend to interpret him as saying "look at my miracles and it will be obvious to you that I am the Messiah." He was saying "love, healing, compassion, joy, hope, liberty and life, these are the real signs of the presence of the kingdom of God, not violence and warfare and the struggle for power." The kingdom of God is not just the last and most successful of a long line of earthly kingdoms established by violence and conquest and naked power. It is utterly different. The Messiah is not just the last and the most effective in a long succession of earthly rulers who waded through blood to their thrones. He is utterly different. It is clear that this is what Jesus is saying because he goes on to pay tribute to John the Baptist, "among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist," but also to make it clear that John belongs to the old order, the old dispensation, "yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

I have the feeling that when our people ask "Has the Redeemer come? Was Christ really the answer?" they ask in the same spirit as John did. They are impatient with the methods of God. They are not our methods. And Christ does not give a direct answer. He does not present us with such final proof that we are compelled to say "That is he!" He simply offers us himself, his life, his teaching, his work, his death, what he was, and what he did and in effect says "This is God's way, the way of love, of healing, of joy, of peace, of service, of the Cross. Perhaps you think it is too slow and would like to hasten it up. Perhaps you believe that you can use the weapons of the world to establish the kingdom of God. Perhaps it all seems foolishness to you but this is my way, God's way, and it is the only way that will work." We have to decide. Is he or is he not the one? As preachers we have to face our people with this decision. Advent is the time when we are called upon to consider who it is who comes.

Advent: "A four week period in which the church joyfully remembers the coming of Christ and eagerly looks forward to his coming again."

I have not touched upon the second great theme for Advent, "the coming again of Christ," to which our attention is drawn by the passages prescribed in the Lectionary. We may find these passages awkward, hard to accept, difficult to understand—so do our people! We may regret their presence and wish to ignore them but we cannot deny that, from the beginning, the theme of the Second Advent has been an integral strand in the preaching and teaching of the Christian Church and we simply dare not dismiss it as merely some kind of primitive aberration. In his Cambridge Sermons Hoskyns wrote, "The perception that the present structure of this world and of society is temporary and incomplete and that it awaits some great catastrophic act of divine transformation forms the background of thought from which the specifically Christian ideas of goodness have been perceived and realized."

The great central thrust of all preaching on the Second Advent must be Hope. Hope, not Fear! Let me indicate briefly, almost telegraphically, the grounds for this.

1. "He shall come again." God reigns and he is the Lord of History. This world is his and he made it. He has a purpose for his world and nothing shall hinder it. He was in the beginning. He will be in the end. "His glory," wrote the late Dr. John Mackay in *Christianity on the Frontier*, "will break upon the world in fresh splendor. We may have to pass through very hell but there will be a new dawn in history and the church will be present at the sunrise." Note these words "in history." There will be within history a manifestation of God's glory worthy of Christ and his Gospel. In the land of the living not merely in the life everlasting beyond death's dark vale. History shall witness a worthy consummation of the purpose of God in Jesus Christ." This is what it means to say, "He shall come again," and it is a message of hope which our world desperately needs to hear.

2. While this doctrine shatters the myth of the inevitability of human progress it saves from the cynicism and despair which, equally inevitable, is the fate of those who cling to such a myth. It reminds us, and it is a salutary reminder, that the very possibility of hope depends upon the abandonment of secular optimism.

3. Inextricably associated with the coming of the Lord is the concept of judgement. This is not a popular concept in the twentieth century. We talk about political justice, economic justice, social justice, but we tend to shy away from the notion of judgement. We proclaim the rights of man, the rights of woman, the rights of the individual, the rights of society but are wary of suggesting that these are backed by divine sanctions and that if they are ignored or trampled upon a divine judgement follows. There can be no light without shadow. If we face the light, the shadows are behind us. If we turn our back on the light, we cannot escape the shadows. Modern men and women find the idea of judgement disturbing and distasteful yet paradoxically it is a message of hope for the one who comes is the one who has come and his judgement is the judgement of love.