

What is Advent About?

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, on 15 December 2019, in Beverley Minster.

James 5: 7–10; Matthew 11:2 –11

I've had several conversations recently about the real focus of this Advent season. I was chatting with a couple of people a week or so back who have noticed that our readings and music often speak of the Second Coming of Christ in glory to judge the world. And these folk are puzzled: "I thought Advent was about preparing for Christmas," they say. "I can't relate to all this stuff about the Second Coming at all." But then I had another conversation that went completely the other way - when I led a meditation at Minster Central the other evening, on a painting of the Annunciation, when Gabriel told Mary she was to be the mother of the Son of God. I got a question at the end: "Vicar, we don't seem to talk about judgement so much during Advent these days - has something changed?"

So it's interesting that different people see very different things in Advent and have different ideas of what the season is for. And it's true that it is a season that is multi-layered: it's not entirely about the second coming of Jesus and it's not entirely about Christmas either, although as far as the secular world is concerned, Advent does seem to have been completely swallowed up by Christmas. I think the real focus of Advent that joins these things together is that it is about people trying to prepare for the coming of God. And because it comes just ahead of the Christmas season, it's natural to stress the link with Christmas. But if you look at the Bible passages set for Advent, it's a bit more complicated than that.

The Old Testament scriptures look for the coming of God to His people. They look forward to the coming of God with excitement because they hope it will mean the defeat of Israel's enemies - the ending of oppression and the beginning of a new era of peace and justice and prosperity. They expected God to come in a particular recognisable way.

And what is so extraordinary when you read all the Bible passages we have in Advent and Christmas, is that despite the heightened expectation and the longing for

God to come, hardly anyone was ready when it actually happened. And hardly anyone recognised God when he did come, as a child at Bethlehem. Even John the Baptist who faithfully prepared the way and warned people to get ready for the coming of God, even John wasn't sure whether Jesus really was what they had been waiting for. On the one hand he's pointing to Jesus saying 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world', but on the other hand he's saying, as he does in this morning's gospel, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

It seems that when God comes to his world people are caught unawares. They expected him to be obvious, to appear in the centre - a king with an army perhaps, toppling governments. Instead he came from left of field - he came in at the edge, born in a stable to a peasant family in a frontier province of the Roman Empire. So whenever we celebrate Christmas we ought to bear that in mind, that the Christmas story is meant to be surprising: that in a world waiting for God to come, God wrong-footed everybody. There is a basic mismatch between what was expected and what people actually got.

And because Christmas has become so comfortable and predictable, we forget how unexpected it was. And it's the purpose of Advent to remind us that when the world waits for God, we don't necessarily get what we expect. I wonder whether that's a reason why the church is so out of favour these days with the wider world. We've performed the almost incredible feat of turning the coming of God into his world into something dull and predictable. No wonder fewer people are interested.

Yet when Christ came at Christmas, the old prophecies were not entirely fulfilled: yes, God has come to his people to reveal his redeeming love; yes, for those who received the word made flesh, he gave power to become children of God. But it seems the world as a whole still lies in darkness and sin; poverty violence and disease still stalk the earth; people still cry out for justice and for freedom from oppression; and the church still prays, "Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven", longing for Christ's reign of justice and peace and prosperity to become a visible reality for all. So we are still waiting for the coming of God to his world. We still need God to come to his world to put things right. Human kingdoms come and go and I don't think many people believe that the government elected on Thursday

will bring the Kingdom of God very much closer. There is still a desperate need for God to come and heal the sickness of the human heart; the sickness of fear; the sickness of greed; the sickness of alienation which prevents us from seeing the image of God in one another.

So how do we prepare for the coming of God to complete his work? How do we anticipate his purposes for the world? I think our preparations this Advent need to be both spiritual and practical.

Spiritually we look for the coming of God in prayer and worship and the study of the scriptures - that's what keeps us sensitive and attuned to the things of God: prayer and worship and reading the Bible are what help us to discern the activity of the spirit and inspire us to get in step with him. And if you need encouragement to do that, then talk to one of the clergy or to a Christian friend; think about trying a house group, which exist precisely for that purpose of helping us to relate our lives to the activity of God; if you're new to faith or feel young in faith, then consider coming to the 'Start Course' in January or invite a friend so you can learn together.

And you can prepare practically for the coming of God, by trying to live as if he were already here - try to live as citizens of heaven while you're here on Earth. Do what you can to make the Kingdom of Heaven a reality, by showing works of generosity and mercy. Care for the environment which seems increasingly fragile. Support the work of those charities who are desperately trying to plug the gaps in public services: food banks; mental health charities; those trying to provide housing for the homeless; charities supporting parents with young children who have no parenting role models; charities promoting literacy; charities supporting the elderly; there's a hamper outside our shop collecting presents for children in foster care this Christmas. There are all sorts of ways in which we can make the Kingdom of God a present reality. Have you ever thought about volunteering to be a school governor or a magistrate? There's a desperate need for people who have a vision for the improvement of our society and to bring the Kingdom of God nearer. It's no good expecting government always to do it for us.

This is how we prepare for the coming of God and we do it prayerfully, hopefully, in the conviction that he will come to us afresh, unexpectedly, like a thief in the night;

coming to you and me personally to deepen our knowledge of his love and faithfulness; and one day coming to us in glory when all the world will see.

So I wonder, will you be ready? Like John the Baptist, we may not know the time and place, but like John we can all do our bit to anticipate his kingdom, to learn the language of justice and mercy and to approach Christmas as those who expect to be surprised.

Reading Texts

James 5:7-10

⁷ Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸ You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. ⁹ Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! ¹⁰ As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Matthew 11:2-11

² When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" ⁴ Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." ⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." ¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.