

The heart of God's Justice ...

... and also of His Grace and Mercy

A reflection for Advent Sunday, 28th November 2021, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Isaiah 40:1-11; Luke 21:25-36

'When you see these things taking place, you know that the Kingdom of God is near'

So today is Advent Sunday, marking the beginning of the Advent season, when we're meant to be thinking about the coming of Christ, not as a baby at Bethlehem, but as the son of man in glory at the end of time. In other words, Advent is the season when we are reminded that the story has an ending. I wonder, how often do you reflect on the fact that we have been told how this story is going to end? Yes, of course, we're used to looking back to the idea that God the Creator made the world in the beginning; that he revealed himself to the Israelites in the Old Testament; that he sent his son to be born; live amongst us; to die and rise again. And we may have a sense that by His Spirit, Jesus is still with us now. But how far do you think of your life as being part of a bigger story, which is moving towards a conclusion?

At one level, of course, this may feel very strange: we get up every morning; we go to work or go about our daily routines; we prepare our meals; see our friends or families; Beverley Minster is still standing; and one day rolls into another without much sense that it's all heading towards some ultimate goal.

And yet at another level, we have a strong sense that history will have an ending. Physicists tell us that eventually, in a few billion years time, the universe will stop expanding and start contracting. And just as it began with a big bang, so eventually it will end with a big crunch. And for all its shortcomings, the Cop 26 summit has perhaps brought home to us all, that if we allow average global temperatures to increase very much more, then much of the Earth will become uninhabitable. Greta Thunberg is a kind of 21st century 'Apocalyptic Prophet' warning us all too credibly that the end of the world is coming. And the pandemic, too, will have shaken us all out of any complacency that life will just carry on uninterrupted. And with the latest South African variant, there is renewed anxiety that the vaccines may not be effective.

And so there's almost a sense that the newspapers have a stronger sense of Advent than we sometimes give them credit for - they are full of stories of impending doom for all humanity. The difference is that the secular end of the world scenarios are without hope, with their sense that the world will one day fall into final chaos. They can only invite us to despair.

But the Christian response is the opposite, as the chaos seems to worsen," so the expectation increases that Christ will come to wrap up history and put everything right. *"Stand up and raise your heads"*, says Jesus in the gospel reading, *"because your redemption is drawing near."*

So the coming of Christ at the end of time in final judgement is good news. It's good news for two reasons. First of all, it means that everything wrong will be brought into the light and exposed and put right; every injustice, every act of cruelty or prejudice, every deed of selfishness or exploitation, every lie that has been covered up and apparently got away with will be brought into the light and exposed for what it is. So the final judgement is good news for the victims. It's good news for the underdogs. It's good news for everybody who feels that at some deep level things are not right.

And that, of course, includes the wrongs that you and I have thought and committed ourselves, which leads me on to the second reason why the coming of Christ in judgement is good news, because the judge comes in mercy. The judge has taken the judgement upon himself on the cross so that he can judge us with forgiveness. So judgement doesn't mean there is any basis for self-righteousness; it doesn't mean some people can set themselves up as better than others. But it means all of us can receive forgiveness. We can be judged in a way that sets us free and allows us to show mercy to one another. And in a sense, the Church is called to live in the light of that final judgement.

So that's what Advent is about: the world will come to an end; as individuals, we shall all of us one day die; the story will reach its conclusion. But the result of that is not that we should despair, but that we should lift up our heads and rejoice - the judgement of God is the basis for having hope and faith. The Kingdom of God is near, and that promise answers the deepest longings of every human heart.

It also means that everything in this world is provisional and temporary and at risk of presenting you with the great anti-climax, I'm also meant to be talking this morning

about the last of the four headings in our Vision Strategy, which is all about transforming our finances and structures. Over the last month or so, we've talked about becoming more Christlike; about reaching people we currently don't; about growing as a Church of missionary disciples. And now we end up talking about transforming our finances and structures, and it all sounds terribly mundane and possibly even a bit banal - surely this bit of the vision isn't going to inspire anybody.

But when you read it in the light of Advent, our finances and structures start to look a bit different. If you are tempted, as I sometimes am, to see our finances and structures as insuperable obstacles and as problems that no one can solve, it's good news to be reminded that they are temporary and provisional - they won't last forever. And the day will come when the Lord has no further use for our money or our committees or our buildings. In the language of the first reading, *'Every Valley shall be lifted up and every mountain will be made low, and the rough places levelled out and made smooth.'* Those things that look permanent and immovable and given, part of the landscape, actually are no such thing. They're temporary. They're penultimate.

And to be reminded that these things will come under God's judgement is to recognise that the judge comes to show mercy and to redeem. Our buildings and committees and administrative structures and staffing roles can indeed be transformed and given a new life-giving purpose in place of what sometimes seems can be the old deadening heaviness. It may mean a kind of death and resurrection, but when the money seems to have run out and none of the PCC roles can be filled and the building threatens to overshadow everything we want to do, then *"Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near ... the kingdom of God is upon you"* and an ending may be approaching that can give us all a new beginning.

Maybe I'm being overdramatic, but the point remains that Advent tells us that nothing in this world is permanent, and that means the difficult things: the hurts; the sorrows; the insoluble problems - are none of them permanent either. And that part of the calling of the Church is to live in the light of the end of the story. The ending which we can look forward to is good news because it takes us into the heart not only of God's justice but of his mercy and grace as well.

Reading Texts

Isaiah 40:1-11

¹ Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." ⁶ A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. ⁹ Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰ See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Luke 21:25-36

²⁵ "There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. ²⁶ People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. ²⁷ At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸ When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." ²⁹ He told them this parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees. ³⁰ When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. ³¹ Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² "Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. ³⁴ "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties

of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. ³⁵ For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.”