

wake up!
a sermon preached on
Advent Sunday

30 November 2014

at

st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by fr david moore, vicar

the lections: Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7,17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

Advent Sunday's symbols are striking. The entrance rite today directed our attention to Advent's unique symbol – the principal seasonal symbol in the liturgical space, as in our homes. The wreath's circularity and its four candles neatly gesture towards two crucial aspects of Advent: the process, though celebrated over four consecutive Sundays, is in fact *circular*; and that it's a process with *four* distinct moments, or movements.

In its circularity Advent is like a template for the ongoing deepening of the soul in Christ. This Advent Sunday we are the same people who underwent Advent last year. Yet it is obvious to all that we are not exactly the same as we were last year – neither each of us individually, nor us as parish, nor our world. Growing in Christ, incarnating Christ, is a life work with a trajectory, a direction – yet, like everything else in the biological domain of which we are a part, accomplished by ever complexifying spirals of transformation.

And this process has four moments, or movements. Advent's four candles are associated with the ancient Hebrew forebears, the prophets, the Baptist, and Mary the Most Holy Birth-Giver. But it should be clear that Advent is not merely a historical commemoration – what would be the point of that! Rather, this is a coming which is to be experienced in every human life – a coming to the Crib of every human heart.

The number four is an ancient symbol of balance – signifying the completion of a dynamic process. The four elements. The four winds. The four seasons. The four temperaments. And, most significantly for us, the four gospels. An initial state of singularity – pure energy or spark – is an unconscious state, requiring differentiation, separation. Nothing can exist as singularity. We know this equally from Genesis: “And God separated the light from the darkness”.¹ And we know this from science: the electron and the proton. Indeed, we know it in so many ways: the male and the female; heaven and earth; Spirit and matter. The inherent tension between two opposites is the necessary energy for a creative synthesis: generating a divine, reconciling third. Four, then, is a material manifestation of the completion of the creative process – a balanced state which is born from an initial unconscious singularity – but now its new creation.

We can also observe this same dynamic underpinning the Eucharistic rite. The gospel writers are unanimous in describing a four-fold dynamic in Christ's one command to his disciples: body taken, blessed, broken, and given.

Returning to this first Sunday, we are reminded how Christ's coming begins – in upheaval, in chaos. Listen again to the striking language of today's scriptures. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence”.² “But in those days... the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heaven will be shaken”.³ Had we read more of Mark chapter 13 we'd have also heard of “wars and rumours of wars... nation rising against nation... earthquakes, famines... betrayal, death, sacrilege, suffering”.⁴

So this is how our task begins – this is the meaning of the number one; of Advent's first Sunday. What might have appeared to be stable, secure, uniform, predictable and reliable is in fact always the incomplete, breaking open. In the language of the physics of chaos theory, a system in equilibrium does not remain so – but must of creative necessity move towards a state

¹ Genesis 1:4

² Isaiah 64:1

³ Mark 13:24-25

⁴ Mark 13

of disequilibrium, which feels like chaos. In Christian spirituality, Advent Sunday declares that this is also the way of the coming of the Christ – to the Bethlehem of every human heart. In the historical moment of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, the apparently secure religion of Israel in the first century Ancient Near East is in fact breaking down. In the present moment of this particular stage of the development of Western Christian consciousness the religious structure which has contained us is breaking down.

Naturally, just as it did to the religious leaders of Jesus' day, this feels from the human point of view to be mere chaos. It can feel like the heavens are being torn open – like stars falling. Our sun seems darkened. Even moonlight fails. This is precisely the situation into which Advent's first Sunday speaks to us – both personally, and collectively.

The gospel also names the 'solution' – that word used with great caution in our materialistic fix-it culture. "When you see these things taking place, you know that [the Christ] is near, at the very gates".⁵ "Beware, be awake... What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake".⁶ From the perspective of our culture's dominant mode, this does not seem much of a 'solution'. We want to be much busier, more productive and more certain than that. We want to *do* something – to rush out and create a plan to bring about a future over which we intend to have control. Our cultural inheritance relentlessly drives us down this spiritual dead end. But the gospel's 'solution' to the chaos we feel – and all the fears and anxieties that this fear activates – is counter-culturally simple and revolutionary. Be awake!

What this command means in more modern terms is perhaps best expressed as the call from unconsciousness to consciousness. The settled state we want to hold onto is in fact always an illusion – backwards-looking, and thus unconscious. And what Advent's first Sunday reminds us about is the evangelical call to wake up – to the work of coming to consciousness. 'Keep awake' means do not try to stave off the chaos and its feelings by attempting to return to some imagined prior state of certainty, success, or glory. 'Wake up' means become conscious of the chaos – the unsettled, the uncertain, the falling stars, the shattered heavens; because this is the necessary condition for the new development, the divine child, eternally coming to birth. Becoming conscious is the *precondition for being ready*: "For you do not know when the master of the house will come".⁷ But come the Christ will – and suddenly.⁸

It is not ours to make the Christ come – that would be a dangerous inflation. That's precisely what Advent's four-fold dynamic presents as hope and joy and liberation for us – the process of Christ's coming is the work of God, unstoppable, gracious, surprising; organic, eternal, Spirit-breathed.

Perhaps Christ comes in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn: who knows! Our task is simply to be awake – to become conscious. Initially, it is enough to wake up.

Advent's four Sundays – its liturgies, symbols, gospels, and its invitation to make space – are our tradition's magnificent gift to our anxious hearts, especially needful at this overburdened time of the year.

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⁵ Mark 13:29
⁶ Mark 13:33, 37
⁷ Mark 13:35
⁸ Mark 13:38