

raise your heads

a sermon preached on

Advent Sunday

29 November 2015

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by fr david moore, vicar

the lections: Jeremiah 33:12-16; Psalm 25: 1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3: 9-13; Luke 21: 25-38

The new-ness and joy of Kuncoro's first presiding at the Eucharist on this first day of the Christian year is a lovely reminder: this one, highly visible transformation in his life recalls us to the fact of the many small and big, visible and invisible, transformations in all of our lives since this time last year. There will be something new in this year's Advent spiritual undertaking – and this will be true for us individually, as well as collectively.

I have been encouraging us to let Advent be Advent – to resist the premature celebration of Christmas – simply because Advent is offered to us as such a profound spiritual gift, simply too wonderful a gift to squander.

The pattern of the lections for the four Sundays of Advent reveals this crucial motif: Advent's Scriptures always begin on this first Sunday with chaos. Listen again to today's texts: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord..."¹ There is a foreboding tone here. We recall that Jeremiah's prophecy of the coming of the Lord involved the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple: the world, as the faithful knew it, was coming to an end! This was a time of immense upheaval, chaos, and dislocation for the children of Israel. The writer to the letter to the church at Thessalonica anticipated an even more dramatic end to all things.² In Luke's gospel Jesus teaches: "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint with foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of heaven will be shaken."³ In all these Scriptures a sense of looming chaos.

Yet Advent's hope is for a birth: the birth of something new. Advent's symbols and liturgies are a way of preparing ourselves for this birth. And in the Scriptures of Advent Sunday the pre-conditions for the birth of the new are starkly set before us: the birth of something new and the chaotic breakdown of the old are intimately related. Those of us baptised into the death and resurrection of Christ should hardly be surprised by this – though I suspect we are surprised, and not a little appalled.

Perhaps this partly explains why we prefer to bypass Advent – wanting instead to rush straight to the happy birth event. But as every woman knows: the months of gestation simply cannot be avoided.

The deep wisdom of the Advent Scriptures reveals this pattern for spiritual growth – which applies to individuals as well as to the collective.

Today, at the beginning of the church's 'Year C' in the lectionary cycle, we commence the reading of the gospel of Luke. Luke the evangelist was writing for a community of third generation Christians in the closing decades of the first century CE, some time after the fall of Jerusalem to Rome in the year 70. Nation had definitely risen against nation, kingdom against kingdom⁴ – with catastrophic results for Jerusalem, for Jews, and for followers of 'the Way'. It was a state of chaos.

Setting down for his friend Theophilus an 'orderly account' of the 'things that had taken place',⁵ Luke constructs from oral tradition and manuscripts a recollection of Jesus speaking into a Jewish religious and political milieu prior to the fall of Jerusalem. During Jesus' life religious

¹ Jeremiah 33:14

² 1 Thessalonians 4:15

³ Luke 21:25-26

⁴ Luke 21:10

⁵ Luke 1:1-4

and political affairs were in an advanced state of decay, though those who held power in its systems desperately attempted to retain the status quo, as Jesus' many disputes with doctrine-keepers reveals. Jesus' teaching prophesied a period of chaos, which they resisted. In every age doctrine keepers resist spiritual development, often aggressively, at times violently.

By the time we get to chapter 21 Jesus has already had many 'stand-up rows' with the religious leaders. But now he speaks openly and bluntly, predicting the imminent chaos into which Jerusalem is unconsciously heading: "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near".⁶ "There will be great earthquakes... famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven."⁷ In the face of all this calamity, people are fainting with fear – overcome by anxiety. No doubt Jesus' message was as popular as Jeremiah's!

Yet Jesus' message is the gift to the church on Advent Sunday. Yes, I did say gift! For today's Scriptures speak directly into the realities of our time also, to our global-village, internet-connected world. News of horrors and calamities which once-upon-a-time might have never come to our village – or at least might have been many months or years in coming – are now available to us even as they are happening. The world's chaos is now our daily diet. And every year at Advent there is some horror event, somewhere. There is indeed 'great distress' on the earth: there is much 'perplexity because of the roaring of sea and waves'.

There are two very common dead-end reactions to this state of affairs. Becoming overwhelmed by the enormity: unable to fix it all up, falling into despair. Or, pretending it's not happening: anaesthetising oneself with trivia, superficiality, nostalgia, self-preoccupation – so much anaesthesia is on offer in the consumer marketplace!

Advent Sunday is good news, then, because it reminds us there is a living alternative to these two dead ends. Chaos and breakdown of the status quo is the necessary precursor to redemption. So, "when these things begin to take place, straighten up, raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near".⁸

The Christ who came, who is coming, who will come again, calls us to stand in the midst of whatever chaos and breakdown we may be experiencing - individually, and collectively – and to neither blink, nor to lose hope. He invites us to inhabit not a fanciful sentimentalised rose-coloured-glasses world; but this very real one, of both appalling suffering and overwhelming beauty. "And when you see these things taking place, you know that the 'kin-dom' of God is near".⁹ All the things that seem to matter so much to us now will pass away – he assures us – "but my words will not pass away".¹⁰ For he is the Word who ushers in the chaos which is the precursor to a birth.

There is such a blessed gift in this: if we will make the space to let Advent accomplish its spiritual task in us. Burdened by so much anxiety – overwhelmed by the enormity of local-global-planetary upheavals – Advent Sunday reminds that these are precisely the means by which we will come to the birth of the new humanity. As we incrementally ingest this gospel of liberation – which this and every Eucharist invites us to do, to become what we eat – so we come to 'straighten up', to raise our heads', to welcome 'the signs' as the way of redemption, the necessary precursor to the coming birth.

Of course, to live into Advent Sunday's truth requires us to "stay awake at all times"¹¹ – to pray, as St Paul counselled, without ceasing,¹² to live in prayer.

vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au

⁶ Luke 21:20
⁷ Luke 21:11
⁸ Luke 21:28
⁹ Luke 21:31
¹⁰ Luke 21:33
¹¹ Luke 21:36
¹² 1 Thessalonians 5:17