



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 28th November 2021

Readings: Jeremiah 33.14-16; I Thessalonians 3.9-13; Luke 21.25-36

Advent Sunday

When the Prime Minister announces new measures to counter the impact of coronavirus Covid-19 he is reminding us that we have a serious role to play in enabling society to live with it. The wearing of masks, and the having of a booster jab, are neither more nor less than our duty to one another. Default, and we risk the suffering of others.

There are countless other obligations that we fulfil for the common good. Paying of our taxes, careful driving of our motor cars, loving our neighbour are cases in point. How much weaker, less stable and more fragile our communal life would be without each of us carefully and consistently assuming responsibility for them. I was hurtling around the M25 recently and realised how utterly dependent upon one another's skill and watchfulness my fellow motorists and I were. We had to heed the signs – especially if they said no entry, road closed, or mind the toads. All in all, it's not very surprising that we lull ourselves into thinking that it's all down to us.

Advent Sunday reverses that trend. Unlike much of the rest of the church year, the readings for Advent are all about the future: the coming of God's reign and the fulfilment of God's purposes, symbolised by that tantalising image of Jesus returning. At Christmas, Passiontide, Easter, Ascensiontide and Pentecost, we ponder narratives about what happened long ago: the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem when Herod was King; the ministry of Jesus in Galilee when women modelled discipleship; the death of Jesus at Calvary when Caiaphas was High Priest; the resurrection of Jesus in a garden when Pilate was Governor; the raining down of the Spirit when a metropolitan crowd was in Jerusalem.

But today, our focus is upon the future, the coming of God's reign. This is a day which essentially rejoices in all that once happened *in order to look forward to what will happen*. And the point is that what will happen is rather less in our hands than we sometimes think as we book our boosters. It's in God's hands. That's why we need some decent eschatology.

Eschatology is a vital aspect of Christian thinking, which gets a special mention in Advent. It looks ahead, and means thinking about the end, about the last things. Eschatology's about the end of all times, when all else is said and done. Bradley Hanson helps us realise that when we use language like 'the end' we can mean two things: it may be the last in a series, or 'the end' can mean a goal or purpose. Basically, eschatology, is both. What will it be like at the end, and what is God's goal for the end? Eschatology tries to help. We might say that it's helping us ponder 'the impact of the future on the present'.¹

The problem is that eschatology is out of vogue these days. Apart from anything else, we eschew such long and inaccessible words. As such, it is misunderstood and misused. Today's Gospel reading is basically grappling with eschatological ideas, but it is not easy stuff. Reflecting upon what Luke has Jesus saying, James Edwards puts it like this: 'The misuse of eschatology ... has resulted in scepticism of eschatology amongst Christians. Misuse of a doctrine usually results in its neglect, and neglect of a theological doctrine weakens the church. Without eschatology, the purpose and destiny of history fall into the hands of humanity alone. No-one', muses Edwards, 'takes solace in that prospect. Unless history can be redeemed, the fallen greatness of human life is the final and tragic word. The longing that things ought not be as they are, and cannot be accepted as they are, is an eschatological longing. The Gospel proclaims there is a sure hope for the future.' End quote² And it is not in our gift. It is the work of God.

As we read Luke 21, we are caught up in just this sort of eschatology. We are not given any specifics about the end God wills – neither when the last thing in history will be, nor what its goal will be. But we are given two important clues about the future God has in store. The first clue relates to who will be caught up in it all, and the second is a parable about how to recognise God's new future is near.

¹ Hanson, Bradley C. 1997 *Introduction to Christian Theology* Minneapolis: Fortress Press page 333

² Edwards, James R 2015 *The Gospel according to Luke* Nottingham: Apollos page 606

So to the first clue, who the end is for.

It is not uncommon for people to think that God has a special treat in store for a few, and lasting punishment for the rest. How readily we obsess about who is in and who is out! St Luke, however, is not so sure. He believes God's redeeming purposes are for everyone. The phrase is that the sign of the end is 'coming upon the world' and for 'world' he uses our old friend *oikoumenh*, which means, 'the whole inhabited world'. In other words, whatever future God has in store for us - and we are urged to trust that it will be shaped by God's goodness and uprightness, God's mercy and steadfast love - that future is not exclusive but all embracing. Not one of us is beyond the scope of God's better tomorrow.

I believe this to be a vital point in a world that can so often seem hideously binary, so that some are embraced because they fit, and the rest are ejected because they are different. The controversy that is rocking Yorkshire Cricket revolves around allegations of racism that left Azeem Rafiq fearing he was out whilst those who mocked or abused him were in. St Luke's Jesus will have nowt to do with that. The future God has in store, where righteousness, truth and love reign, will redeem the whole created order. The hope is for everyone, indeed for all things.

Recognising when it is near is a bit tricky. It's suggested that natural phenomena might help us: the leaves appearing on a fig tree, even disasters that strike anxiety and dread into people. But that is nothing new; earthquakes and tumultuous seas have always frightened us. In verse thirty, the phrase 'these things' probably refers to the fall of Jerusalem. So Luke wants us to believe that the destruction of the holy city will be a sign of how 'the end' is near, that God's new reign of goodness and uprightness, of mercy and steadfast love will come as Jerusalem falls. But 2000 years later, we are not there. Maybe that is because within the timeframe of eternity, 'near' could mean anything. We cannot read these passages as giving us exact timeframes for that eschatological miracle.

Frankly, it would be absurd to think that we have an accurate timetable for these last things. No, what we are having presented to us is not a timetable for when, nor a trailer for how, but an alarm bell to be alert, vigilant and therefore ready. The clues maybe a tad opaque, but those who train themselves to keep their antennae open can hope, in community with others of like mind, to have a growing understanding that God's kingdom is being ushered in.

Ultimately, Advent is a time of preparation. It's not preparing us for Christmas, not getting us ready for the carols, the cakes and the gifts. Advent is waking us up to the on-going work of God, which forever casts light to disperse shadows in the here and now. But it's waking us up even more to the eschatological truth for which we pray every time we make the Lord's Prayer our own. 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven' is the Advent prayer par excellence. Every day when we say it, we are invited also to listen expectantly, 'Hark, what a sound stirs on the earth and trembles in the air. Is it the thunder of the Lord's appearing?'

You see, all our efforts matter - paying taxes, driving carefully, loving the stranger and our neighbour - but that's because they partner God in all that God in Christ has done, is doing and will do. Advent is the faithful, hopeful, joyful looking forward to Christ's completion of all that is, and it is why we sing:

Through life and death, through sorrow and through sinning,
he shall suffice me, for he hath sufficed:
Christ is the end, for Christ was the beginning,
Christ the beginning, for the end is Christ.³

Hallelujah! Thanks be to God.

N. P. Uden

28th November 2021

³ F. W. H. Myers 1843-1901 from the hymn *Hark what a sound* RS 660.4