

## **First Sunday of Advent Year C**

The annual cycle of Christian worship begins again. Advent is not, as many suppose, simply 'preparations for Christmas', either domestic, celebratory or devotional. Rather, Advent begins by picking up the theme of ultimacy referred to in the readings for the Sunday before Advent. The story of the universe is not simply meandering around under the sole influence of physics. There is a purpose to it all, and there is a purpose to your life and mine.

The Incarnation – the birth of Jesus – emerges quite naturally from these considerations. Advent 2, 3, and 4 invite us to reflect on the deep consistency between the message of the Old Testament and the events of the New Testament.

### **OT**

#### **Jer 33: 14-16**

Jeremiah is writing in the context of national ruin precipitated by decline in 'traditional values'; those values were associated with the kingship of David. His kingdom broke into two pieces under his quarrelsome sons, and David's tradition of faithfulness to God suffered grave neglect both north and south of the border. Here the prophet foresees the restoration of that high tradition, with beneficial consequences particularly for the southern kingdom of Judah.

It is hardly surprising that Christians have seen here an expression of confident longing which will receive its ultimate fulfilment in the coming of Jesus. But it is going too far to suggest that this might have been in the mind of Jeremiah.

One further thought. 'Jeremiah is writing ...' is too simplistic. In all probability Jeremiah never actually wrote a word. His sermons and prophetic outbursts were faithfully recorded by Baruch.

#### **Psalms 25: 1-10**

In this psalm of penitence the psalmist acknowledges in a remarkably mature way the tangle of impulses in his own heart. He is fearful (verse 1); he is conscious of the sins of his youth (verse 6); he longs to be at peace with himself and with his God (verses 3, 4 and 6); notwithstanding the maturity of his self-understanding he knows he has much need of instruction (verses 7 and 8). We can ourselves learn a great deal from this psalm.

#### **Epistle 1 Th 3: 9-13**

Many believe this to be earliest of Paul's many letters to his churches. This particular selection of verses doesn't raise the issues of Paul's evolving theology, or the crises in the early church. Instead these verses speak eloquently of the deep affection Paul evidently has for his friends in Thessalonika. The Spirit is clearly driving him on to preach and found churches in other places, but he

remembers with joy his time in Thessalonika, and longs to return to renew friendships and pastoral relationships.

Look at verse 12, which is a prayer that these Thessalonian Christians may 'abound in love'. Why might Paul have written those words, if indeed everything was hunky dory in Thessalonika? Do they perhaps point to a smidgen of disquiet in Paul's mind? Or are they just a form of blessing? After all, when we bless one another with the words of the Grace, we are not implying that there is a deplorable lack of grace, or love, or fellowship.

### **Gospel Luke 21: 25-36**

This reading from Luke chapter 21 reminds us of Mark 13, in which Jesus is reported as warning his friends of terrifying events to come. Those events did indeed come, when a new Roman Emperor finally lost all patience with the level of discontent and subversion going on in his Judean province, and decided to make an example of the Jews; he crushed them utterly. Of course this was, for the Emperor, a clear signal to the rest of his Empire, that dissent would not be tolerated. But it was a defining moment in the story of Judaism, whose effects lasted for nearly two thousand years.

Some have suggested that these words were not actually spoken by Jesus at all, but were written into the gospel to encourage terrified believers to see the link between Jesus and their own sufferings.

This dire warning can be applied, and mis-applied, to our own time. There are those who see, in every natural disaster and every human conflict, a 'fulfilment' of this 'prophecy'. Such a literal approach is not warranted, however; we may read these verses, today, as pointing to the 'close at hand' character of the end, or purpose, of everything. In his wonderfully witty 'Hitchhikers Guide', Douglas Adams exposes the answer to Life, the Universe and Everything as '42' - a totally unremarkable number, one that we might encounter every day. In Romans 10, Paul makes a similar point: to find the truth you don't have to go scrambling up mountains or plunging into the depths of the sea; the truth is right at your elbow. In these terms, this passage makes sense in a different way: you don't have to scour your newspapers for signs of what really matters in the end; look across the dining-room table at your family; look along the bus.