

Second 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

Either Baruch 5:1-9

The book of Baruch is found in the Apocrypha, the collection of writings that did not 'make it' into the Biblical Canon. A number of Christian commentators have dismissed it as derivative and trite, but others have seen in it truly original ways of employing the tradition to express and cope with extreme distress in a time of decline. Its authorship is attributed to Baruch, the highly-placed scribe of Jeremiah, but many scholars believe this attribution to be unsustainable; the mood and sentiments expressed fit better with a date somewhere between the fourth and first centuries BCE, far later than Baruch's lifetime. This apparently false attribution is a frequently-occurring feature of public writing in the biblical period. It served as a way of accrediting what is being said, by invoking the name of a great figure of the past as 'patron' of the work.

This passage does indeed include some derivative material. Verse 7, for example, is almost a direct quotation of Isaiah 40:4 – every valley shall be lifted up up, and every mountain and hill made low. Jerusalem is the focus of the book and particularly of this passage, which speaks to a nation, a people, who feel themselves forlorn, oppressed and forgotten. The message of the writer is one of hope.

Or Mal 3: 1-4

Markedly different is this alternative passage from Malachi, with its chilling reminder that the day of the Lord is not simply to be welcomed as a time of relief from suffering. The day of the Lord's coming will be a time of judgement, of refinement, until the point is reached when the 'Sons of Levi' will be able to offer their gifts to the Lord 'in righteousness'.

Verse 4 further reminds us that a mood of nostalgia is prevalent; the writer longs for the 'days of old' and the 'former years' when evidently things were as they always should be and will be.

Though perhaps understandable, the theology of nostalgia is not necessarily sound, especially in the light of the frequent prophecies to the effect that 'behold, God is doing a new thing'. It is worth asking ourselves why Malachi introduces the nostalgic theme; is this motif an essential feature of his hope, that former conditions shall be restored, or does it simply speak directly to his audience's felt need for the securities and glories of the past?

Canticle (in place of the Ps): Luke 1: 68-79 *Benedictus*

Luke's outstanding skills as a poet are certainly to the fore here, as in the equally treasured Magnificat (verses 46-55). The favour of God, the faithfulness of God to his ancient promises – these are the underlying assumptions of this beautiful poem. But the proclamations that are grounded in those underlying assumptions are startling and innovative. Zechariah and Elizabeth and old and childless, yet it is through them that the first announcement of the Lord's coming is to be heard. And that coming is plain, unmistakable and irrefutable. The ways of the Lord are salvation, forgiveness, tenderness, mercy and peace, heralded by dawn and light.

Epistle Phil 1: 3-11

In writing to his churches Paul frequently includes a paragraph or two of fulsome compliments to his target audience. Even if his key message is a painful challenge, he is careful to make positive and encouraging noises. We might feel a bit suspicious at this observation. Beware Paul when he is showering compliments around!

But this is not just complimentary. There is also hope; the work of becoming is still a work in progress, and we may be confident that God will complete it in us, echoing the thoughts of Malachi about the Sons of Levi.

Gospel Luke 3: 1-6

In this Gospel reading we see the words of old Zechariah coming true. His son John prepares the way of the Lord – a theme that can be traced back to the image of the pilgrims returning from exile in, for example, Isaiah 35.

Luke is careful here to situate these events in a real historical setting. Unfortunately, the various cultures that then dominated the eastern Mediterranean did not share a common way of dating events, so it is by no means easy for us to check Luke's data against independent sources.

Why is Luke so very careful about this? Is it just to record time and place? Not really. This elaborate catalogue of the rich and powerful serves another purpose. It stands as a perpetual reminder that it is not these 'great' people who deliver God's gifts of peace, but rather it is from among the humble and meek, the overlooked and disregarded, that God's promised deliverance will come.