

First Sunday of Advent Year B

Advent is both the end and the beginning of the Christian year. It begins by pointing us to the end of all things in the fulfilment of God's mission of love, and then leads us gently through some key moments and key people in the story of that mission of love, especially in relation to the coming of Jesus

Old Testament

Isa 64: 1-9

These words of the great prophet Isaiah sound like a tract for our own times. God, you took us by surprise (v3); why do you not do so again to make your name known to your adversaries as you did to (for?) us.

There are, however, several references to God's unfortunate habit of hiding from us (see esp. vv4.5). This rather strange theme occurs also in Isa 45:15.

The book we know as the prophecy of Isaiah spans a considerable and changeful period of Jewish history, from before the Exile (Isaiah's call was in about 740 BCE) to the return from Exile somewhere around 540 BCE – perhaps two hundred years. It is hardly surprising that many scholars find it implausible to see this wonderful book as written by one man. Instead they see it in three parts, roughly Chapters 1-39, 40-55, and 56-66: before during and after the Exile. There are sufficient literary distinctions to give real weight to this argument, but nevertheless there is also a degree of consistency that suggests that it came from a school of prophets that was founded by and took the name of Isaiah. In a sense, then, one mind can be said to have guided its formation.

We can see that these two references to God's hiddenness occur in parts 2 and 3 of the book. But while part 2 can be claimed to relate to times of desolation and despair, why is God spoken of as hidden in this final section of the book, relating as it does to the return from Exile? Given the thrust of the final chapters, it could be that the prophet's vision extends beyond the mere restoration of the *status quo ante*. He has a vision of God's sovereignty over all nations being at last acknowledged and even acclaimed world-wide. So, why does God persist in this cloak-and-dagger kind of existence? Why does God not "put his foot down with a firm hand" and let the world know what's what?

Underlying the Advent season is a theme of waiting expectantly for momentous change to come. So pervasive is this idea that we might well conclude that the waiting is in fact more important than the fulfilment – something which is echoed in many human experiences of longing, including perhaps especially the tradition of courtly love.

Ps 80: 1-7, 17-19

This extract filters out the refrain found in verses 4, 8 and 20: *Turn us again, O God of hosts* – or rather, by omitting the second and third occurrences of that refrain it fails to draw our attention to the liturgical character of this psalm.

Like the passage from Isaiah, this is a plea for God to be God, the sovereign God, and **rule!** There is in verse 18 an implicit claim that the throne of David is at God's right hand (in a supporting role), so why isn't God backing the house of David.

Epistle: 1 Cor 1: 3-9

The Corinthian correspondence could be described as “an iron fist in a velvet glove”. Well, here's the velvet glove! And (to avoid the charge of wild exaggeration) we must balance the “iron fist” reference by pointing out that Paul's overriding concerns are for the well-being of this little community. He is not in the business of rubbishing them “because they're *not* worth it”. He is advising, correcting, guiding, but always with a loving hand.

The velvet glove, then, bears embroidery that will tell us something of what is to come. In verse 5 Paul comments on how very well the Corinthians have been served by such a diverse group of missionaries; later we shall find how this very diversity has resulted in the formation of enthusiastic parties around each leader. In verse 7 he comments that the Corinthians will certainly not go to heaven lacking in Spiritual Gifts; later in the letter we shall find out how their obsession with such gifts – especially the more spectacular ones like tongues and prophecy – have led to a hierarchy of first- and second-class Corinthian Christians, as well as a division into sects and parties. In verse 8 he assures them they will be kept steady and without blame; only later do we discover that in several ways that haven't yet fully appreciated the radical change of lifestyle that befits membership in the body of Christ.

Gospel: Mark 13: 24-37

The phrase “Son of Man” is one of the most enigmatic in the entire bible. It has so many connotations that it is really difficult to pin down exactly what Jesus meant when he used it. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that (as he so often did) Jesus takes a familiar word or phrase and applies it in such a radically new way that a detailed study of how it has been used by others becomes (almost!) of only marginal interest. We are left wondering, quite often, to what extent Jesus was intending us to pick up the other meanings that were floating around at the time and mingle them with his new usage.

It seems probable, though, that unless the phrase had some power to conjure up ideas in the heads of Jesus' listeners he would not have used it. Sometimes his aim is precisely to conjure up established ideas and identify himself with them; sometimes, however, his aim seems to be to hold up the established view almost as an “Aunt Sally”, that requires correction.

Here, it seems we are to understand that Jesus, in his self-identification with the Son of Man idea, is linking himself in some detail with the expected end of history. In the biblical world-view, that means (at least, and probably more) that Jesus in some sense is the end, the goal, of history.

Verses 28-32 urge his followers to be perpetually on the lookout for “signs of the end”. It is at this point that we need to hold in our minds the metaphorical character of “the end”. While it may be the case that Jesus really is talking about the moment when all clocks can be thrown away because the red carpet of time is itself being rolled up and put into store, keep in mind also the link between the end and the goal, the conclusion and the objective. We’re to be on the lookout for signs that the kingdom is near.

And in the final verse we’re told why: because when the master returns his servants are expected to be fully occupied with their assigned tasks in preparation for it. When there are to be seen signs of the coming kingdom, we should be aligning ourselves actively with that coming.