

Advent 1
2/12/2012

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 33:14-16
Psalm 25:1-10
I Thessalonians 3:9-13
Luke 21:25-36

Waiting for God

Keep alert! Be on your guard! Look for the signs! Keep awake! These are not just signs on the side of the road, or on trams, or near railway crossings. These are the words we hear at Advent, as we begin a new Church year. The readings today, and some we have heard in the lead up to this day, bring to mind the word through the prophets that, God will fulfil the promise to bring forth justice and righteousness in the world. Fair and equitable relationships between people will be realised, despite the upheavals and chaos that disturb life. This is a noble hope, and judging by the news we hear each day, one that seems more and more like an impossible possibility.

The challenge of Advent is that it calls the Christian community to trust God, to wake up, to cast off the burdens of life that weigh us down and be attentive to what God has always willed to do. God has an end in view for the world, and the Church is not that end. The church is here for a purpose. To be a faithful, active, and upstanding community that knows God's promise of a new world, and looks for it, hopes for it, prays for it and works for it. It lives to hope and wait for a new regime defined for us in the life and death of one whose birth we will soon celebrate with great joy.

The curious thing about Advent is that we know it leads to Christmas and the celebration of a birth, but on the first day of the New Year we always hear words about the end of all things, as depicted in the colourful apocalyptic literature of the Gospels. It seems contradictory, but the Gospels associate apocalypse with the Passion of Christ and, as Luke does today, lead us on to imagine chaos of cosmic proportions. But the Gospels also challenge us to read the signs, and look for the hope within the chaos, the light within the shadow. On the first of Advent we begin by lighting a tiny flame that stands for something that reaches out us from the darkest depths. The light of Christ proclaims that torture and death did not triumph over this victim. In him life reigns and will reign, because in him was the power that gave life to Creation. He is the embodiment of the hope that the reign of God does come in time and history. This is a prophetic hope, and the hope by which the church lives.

The Apocalyptic literature in the Gospels centres on three themes: the time of persecution, the time of destruction and the time of the coming of the Son of Man. Although it is not obvious from the section of the Gospel we read, Luke, who writes later than the other Evangelists, and does so with the whole world in view, suggests the time of persecution and the time of destruction are past. Jerusalem has fallen. For Luke this is the time when the Son of Man is expected: the human agent who brings in the regime of God.

The complaint about Luke as compared with Mark is that he lacks urgency. In Mark the Son of Man is “at the gates”, but in Luke, time has passed, history has run on. Luke’s particular task is to deal with a Christian community that has settled in for the long haul waiting for the fulfilment to come. Faced with a long wait the temptation is to go to sleep, or just take things easy in such a way that there is no real and active expression of faith.

Given his time, and his focus on the whole world Luke shapes his message in a way that Hellenistic thinkers would understand. He casts Jesus as a prophet, and in the Hellenistic world of his day, a prophet was more reliable if some of his words could be shown to have come true. Therefore in Luke the persecutions and destruction are past, which means the promise for the future is all the more certain. For Luke, time has run on and time will run on, but the outcome is even more assured because of what has already come to pass. Luke’s aim is to help the Christian community live faithfully through the long haul of history, in which the scope of God’s mission takes in the whole wide world, not just the history of the disciples, or the fate of the city of Jerusalem.

Luke’s message is: we shall have God. Those who stay alert, who endure the long haul, who bear witness and remain at prayer have nothing to fear from the coming of the Son of Man, for his advent will be a time of liberation and rejoicing. A time when creation reaches its goal.

There are many images for advent, but all of them involve staying alert while we wait. The scene outside the doors of the Customs Hall in the International Airport is always one of gentle but chaotic excitement and expectation as friends and family gather to welcome loved ones home. Each time the doors open the level of expectation rises. Those who were chatting or looking in another direction suddenly become attentive. Family members compete to be the first to recognise the one they expect. People stand on tiptoe and their faces light up as they search to see if this time the one who comes will be for them. At each opening, for some, recognition takes place. They rush forward to embrace; to celebrate, to share the load. And the rest of the crowd goes back to nervous chatting, pacing about, hoping that soon the doors will open and for them too, the time of waiting will be over.

As we stand on the threshold of a new Christian year the promise of God with us is introduced to us once more. The small, flickering flame of our first Advent Candle seems small and insignificant, compared with the flames of fire we fear in summer, or the burning passions that threaten to engulf the hopes of peace in Syria, Egypt, Israel and Palestine. In the context of our own lives, often overwhelmed by the cares of the world or physically and mentally exhausted from the troubles of the year that has ended, we may be inclined to be sceptical about the power of this tiny flame and the strength of the illumination it can offer us.

But as we enter the season of Advent the church asks us to renew our faith in the future God has chosen to give us in Christ. We, who are able to look back on 2000 years of Christian faith and wonder what happened to the Kingdom Jesus inaugurated, are directed again to God's promised sovereignty in history. While upheavals and crises continue to threaten and perplex us we find ourselves called to attend to the promise that deep within history a seed of life and hope has been sown in the work of Christ. We are challenged not to flag in our witness. Our attempts to find security are questioned. And we are called to be ready for God to act amongst us again. The how and the when of that may be uncertain, but there is one thing we do know. Beyond all worries that burden us, and the dark depression that dogs our steps, we shall have God, for God has chosen to have us. When the time is fulfilled, when the doors open, it is him we shall see.
