

Advent 1
2/12/2018

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 33:14-16
Psalm 25
Luke 21:25-36

Advent: risen to a new hope

In a sentence:
Hope raises dry belief

Advent is the season the church devotes to reflection on the promised approach of God, an approach which is often depicted in the Scriptures as we heard of it today – in apocalyptic language.

Whatever we might make of that way of thinking, it is worth noting that the modern notion of ‘apocalypse’ has moved considerably from the biblical sense. The word itself means simply ‘revelation’; the book of Revelation is sometimes called ‘the Apocalypse’ for this reason. Around this anticipated end-time unveiling the Bible depicts a range of extraordinary and – frankly – terrifying events.

Contemporary talk of an apocalypse usually corresponds only to the apocalyptic events themselves to the *terror* – and not to the revelation. Thus we might speak of an ‘Apocalypse Now’ – a nuclear apocalypse or an ecological apocalypse, by which we designate scale and intensity and effect.

This is clear enough to us as we use the word in its common sense but what might be less clear is that the *effect* of an apocalypse – understood in this way – is *silence*. The bomb has gone off, the biosphere has collapsed, worlds have collided and suddenly there is neither voice to be heard nor ear to hear it. There is only darkness, smoke and dust.

Yet, though the scale and intensity of the imagery of scriptural apocalyptic is great, it doesn’t anticipate silence. Those events anticipate a word, an address, a showing-forth. The force of the imagery is not violent destruction in itself, not the fire or the storm or the earthquake, but rather pushes to the force of the word to be clearly spoken. This is a world-shaking word but nonetheless one which the speaker expects will be heard because there will be ears to hear it.

The question biblical apocalyptic poses, then, is not how can such things be in the Bible but what is the word to be heard through them? If God is coming, what are we to anticipate?

The answer to this is simply that we wait for the revealing of God’s ways, as our psalmist today put it (Psalm 25). This is the revelation of God and of ourselves as we are – *properly* – together.

Now this is correct so far as it goes but we have not yet said enough, because it could all quite easily have been said by a ‘Before Christ’ Jew, and we are ‘Anno Domini’ Christians. What Jesus does and what happens to Jesus *changes* talk about God and ourselves, and God’s coming to us.

And so *the* apocalyptic event of the New Testament is not what Jesus foretells in our text today but what finally happens to him himself: the resurrection (resurrection being an apocalyptic category). Resurrection was not then – as it is typically now – the mere *idea* that the dead might stop being dead. Talk of resurrection arose from particular needs and led to particular anticipations: resurrection talk had a particular purpose linked to the purpose of apocalyptic thinking. The apocalypse would reveal the ways of God but not just to those who are still standing when the time comes. We wonder *whether* the dead can be raised but for apocalyptic thinking they *have* to be raised in order that we *all* might see the ways of God with us: the book God has written out of our stories (to recall our thinking from last week). Resurrection – at least in the Bible – is about *revelation*.

Talk of *a* resurrection in this context, then, is talk of the beginning of the end. The resurrection of Jesus is not a one-off thing in itself, an abstracted curiosity. In that context it heralds the approach of God. In this way, the resurrection is an ‘Advent’ event.

And this brings us to a surprising recurrence in the gospel narratives. On the one hand, the *resurrection* of Jesus heralds the approaching reign of God – the end has begun.

Yet, on the other hand, this is precisely where Jesus’ public ministry began, when everything was getting going and neither cross nor resurrection were in sight: ‘the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is near’ (Mark 1.14f; Luke puts this differently – cf. Luke 4.14-21) – the end has begun.

Jesus’ ministry begins with a heralding of the approach of the reign of God, and ends in the same way. Yet the kingdom doesn’t get nearer in the resurrection than it was in the early preaching, simply because a little more time has passed. Rather, that point is that, in being raised, the dead Jesus simply does what the living Jesus had done from the beginning: heralds the approach of God, the ‘kingdom come’ (-ing).

To push this a little further: for the New Testament, the resurrection of Jesus on the one hand and, on the other hand, the preaching and ministry of Jesus (as the signs of the nearness of God) – these *are the same thing*. The New Testament’s answer to the question, Is God coming? is the same as its answer to the question, Is Jesus risen?

This is not a connection we often make, even as Christians. We find it easier to hold to the teaching of Jesus and to let the matter of the resurrection hang as an open question. Yet this is to miss the connection between them. Whatever the resurrection is, it *does* what the teachings do; whatever the teachings are they *do* what the resurrection does. What they each do is introduce *hope* into the world, a hope that God is yet coming, with ‘more’, with peace.

The difference between holding to Jesus’ teachings only and holding them in relation to the resurrection is the difference between belief and hope. Belief knows that there ‘is’ a God and knows some things about God. Belief can be greatly committed to godliness in thought and action. It can also be closed to God’s ‘more’.

Hope is repentant belief, belief which looks for yet more. The God of hope exceeds the God of belief; the God of hope is Spirit, which cannot be tied down. This is why Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry links the approach of God to repentance: the kingdom of God is near, *repent* and believe the good news – a word to *believers*. This is why the risen Jesus sends the Spirit. And it is why, in our gospel reading this morning, the coming apocalypse is *good* news: ‘when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’

That God's redemption is drawing near is the meaning of every action of those in Christ, whose every action had just that meaning. We do not merely believe. We hope, we wait for yet more light and truth, and we shape our lives now – in words and actions – to be ready for when it comes and to show others what they too, might look for.

Jesus is risen, God is coming: Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.
