

**Advent 1**  
**28/11/2010**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 2:1-5**

**Psalms 122**

**Romans 13:11-14**

**Matthew 24:36-44**

### **Time to wake out of sleeping!**

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A friend sent a card with the message: “Jesus is coming – look busy!” The picture on the front is a spoof on Holman Hunt’s picture of Jesus the light of the world knocking on a door. The call to be alert, to watch, and to be ready, sounds loudly on this day the themes of which relate to a heightened sense of the coming presence of Christ. The texts call us to rouse from sleep: “...*besides, you know what time it is...now is the moment for you to wake from sleeping... salvation is nearer now, the night is far gone*” [Rom 13:11-2] and “*keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming*” [Mat 24:42]. The card my friend sent is true in the sense that the Christ we are called to be ready to receive is not the babe of Bethlehem, but the Christ in glory. The first Sunday of Advent is rather like prologue to a play. It does not start at the beginning instead it uncovers the promised end then puts the origin of the story in the broader perspective this brings. The “end” - the purpose of it all - gives significance to the beginning.

This is an important key to the Church’s life. We do not live from the past. We live from the future based on a promised hope that is yet to be fully realised. This affects how we go about remembering and we shall come across this in the last line of the final hymn when we sing: “May we, impassioned by your living Word, remember forward to a world restored.”

All of this affects how we read St Paul, whose Advent frame of mind grew on the soil of Jewish apocalyptic writing. Texts, such as Daniel interpreted current wars, rumours of wars and accompanying tribulations as the last writhing of a cosmic struggle between good and evil that would end with God vindicating the faithful and gifting them with the new age of the Kingdom. In the New Testament the events of Christ’s life and death became emblematic of that struggle, and with the resurrection arrived the breaking in: the first hint of the promised age to come.

Chapters 12 and 13 of Romans are set within a framework of these ideas. Paul sees there is an old age, characterised as the age of darkness, which is driven by the works of the flesh. When he speaks against debauchery, quarrelling, envy and jealousy, he is not being moralistic. He is talking about self-centred living such as we might associate with being obsessed by greed, questing for power, lusting after warfare and its spoils. Paul is quite clear. Because of what God has done in Christ, the old age is passing away and a new age, characterised as the age of light, has broken in. He wants his audience to wake up to this shift, because the fulfilment of what Christ has done is pressing in on us. Paul never goes so far as to say the Age to come has arrived. For him the present is still in the grip of the old ways, but in view of what God did in Christ, the old ways are no longer meant to be determinative for us. Those who are “in Christ” have been drawn into the New Age with him, which is why Paul counsels the Romans to “lay aside the works of darkness”. A friend who was once

head of a University College says he used say to the day staff that they really knew nothing about College life because the real stuff happened at night. Paul calls his audience not to live undercover, but to “live honourably” as if in the day, putting on the amor of light: a symbol for the new clothes given to a person who has been baptised. Living honourably means living as people of the Spirit in a world that is otherwise driven by desire: and that includes doing nothing to be ashamed of, nothing unmentionable that must stay covered up.

For those who are receptive to it, living in the incoming new time of Christ creates fresh zeal that makes them vigilant for God’s purposes and it gives birth to a new form of ethical living.

This sense of a vision from the future that sets the scene for how life is lived now can be found in the reading from Isaiah. The text is widely regarded as a late addition to the book, possibly having been placed there long after the Exile, which is the subject of much of the later chapters. Isaiah 2 therefore could be read like a prologue that prefigures, on a grand scale, the theme of life after exile and restoration. The scene of the raising up of the mountain of the Lord’s house is not literal: it is mythic language with a cosmic edge, because in the raising of this mountain heaven and earth are joined.

In other parts of scripture a river of life flows out from the Temple of God to nourish the world. In this case people flow in to the habitation of God, attracted by the nourishing teaching found there. The outcome of God’s teaching will be that an unprecedented level of peace will come to the world, such that no one will need to study war any more, and the implements of death will be refashioned into implements of life. God’s gift to the world is peace, and peace becomes the task of the people of God.

Once again we find ourselves reading time at a deeper level than normal, and judging our present world from a perspective that in some ways lies outside of history, and yet has an impact within history. God’s eternity issues in new visions of life, and new practices amongst us and if we hear Isaiah’s call to Jacob to walk in the light of the Lord as referring also to us, then here is an invitation to travel on our way, nourished by this grand vision that will at the same time lead us to live a new ethical life.

The last paragraph of the Basis of Union affirms that the Uniting Church “belongs to the people of God on the way to the promised end”. Note that it says the, not a, as one of our UnitingCare Agencies translated it. The promised end is the end God wills to gift to us, not the end we design for ourself. The Basis is clear not only that there is such an end, but also about what we expect the end to be like [Dutney p 15]. It will be the day when the kingdoms of the world will become the kingdom of Christ who will reign forever [Para 1]. It includes the reconciliation of humanity under God’s sovereign grace [Para 17] and it will include the reconciliation and renewal of the whole creation [Para 3]. We are called to wake up to this vision of life and to what it means. This is not the kind of scorched earth theology that some Christians read into the apocalyptic language of the scriptures, some of whom proclaim that joining in the last great war is the way to aid the fulfilment of all things: the very opposite to the intention. The promised end is what God has revealed God wants for the world, which in metaphorical language is a city of peace where all may come to be nourished and dwell in safety. This is the “end” to which the work of God is moving, and the

people of God have been raised up to witness to that end. In a world of wars and rumours of wars the church is called live in peace. Peace is the gift and peace is the task.

This means more than being pacifist or anti –nuclear. It means taking a stance in life as Advent people whose living is oriented away from greed toward mercy, away from racism and sexism toward inclusive community life, away from negativity to nurture, and away from destruction towards planting and building up. Why would we do this? Because Jesus is coming to us in the saving power of the Word and Spirit to fill us with new zeal that will enable us to be busy bearing witness to his gentle presence and ministry in the world, to the glory of God, whose glory will last until the end of time.

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