

Advent 1 Hope Year B

Happy New Year! Today is the first day of a new Church year. I was up in Auckland teaching at St John's College recently and the Church calendar was one of the topics we covered. Whenever I teach, I always learn a lot. One thing I learned on this course was that Advent starts when it does because it was intended to be 40 days long, just like Lent, leading up to Epiphany.

The Feast of Epiphany was important to the early Church because it commemorated the revelation of the incarnate God. Over time the focus shifted more to the incarnation itself, Christmas Day and so now we have a shorter season of Advent followed by the 12 days of the season of Christmas.

I talked to the students about how very counter-cultural it would be for the Church to observe a solemn fast like Lent all through December, telling people to abstain from things like alcohol and chocolate. If anyone was to pay attention to us, end of year events like office Christmas parties would be a little boring. But, regardless of how we choose to observe advent, solemn fast or pre-Christmas party, it's the looking forward that gives the season its hopeful character.

And it's hope that's the theme for this first Sunday in advent. Now, when we read about hope New Testament, the word that's normally translated "hope" has quite a different meaning than what I think the English word means to most people in everyday usage. For a start, there is far more certainty conveyed in the Greek word ἐλπίς [elpis] than the modern English word hope.

It's this sense that I think the committal in the Book of Common Prayer funeral service is trying to get across. "...the sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life." This doesn't express a vague hope that the dead might live in Christ, for Thomas Cranmer it was a certainty.

And this is another dimension of Advent. As we journey to Christmas and Epiphany the readings set down in the lectionary also remind us of Christ's second coming. This is clearly the focus of this morning's Gospel reading. Passages like this tend to cause a lot of discussion and plenty of people expend much time and energy trying to figure out exactly what the Second Coming might look like.

Opinion ranges greatly. Some engage in very detailed predictions based on literal readings of bits of the Bible that may or may not have anything to do with Christ's return. The readings set down for morning prayer over the last few weeks have been from Isaiah and Revelation. There's certainly a lot of material there to obsess over if that's what you're into.

At the other extreme, many prefer to think of the Second Coming as entirely metaphor and any renewal of this world as being wholly dependent on humanity and our efforts. In this view, it's up to us. If Christ comes it will be only in the sense that we have built a world that reflects his teaching and example.

Speaking personally, I'm not sure I find either extreme inspires a great deal of hope. I think of a view that God will bring this age to an end *our* only job being to believe in a set of propositional truths is a misreading of the Gospel. This has, I think, contributed to attitudes towards creation and social justice that are at least partly to blame for many of our world's big problems. On the other hand, if it really is entirely up to humanity to sort things out, we don't exactly have a very inspiring track record.

Now you're very welcome to believe that God will act decisively to bring about a new order. You might also find this idea a bit fanciful and prefer to believe that if justice and love are going rule in this world then it's up to us. I for one see no contradiction in these two ideas and I'm very happy to believe both that God will act (and I would say is acting even now) and that humanity, especially the Church, will be the instruments through which this will happen.

Rather than focussing on the *how*, it's the object of our hope, the *what* we are hopeful for, that inspires me more. The great thing about talking about hope today is that most of us can still remember last week. The last Sunday of the Church's year celebrates Christ the King (or the Reign of Christ or Christ in All Creation, whichever you prefer.)

It's this vision of the Kingdom of God holding full sway over the world that is our hope. Jesus' teaching about his Father's kingdom tells us about what we should expect. When the Kingdom of God is known in its fullness in this world, no one will be unvalued for being too young, too old, too poor or too "unproductive" in economic terms. The contribution we make will be measured not in dollars but in how loving we are.

Jesus tells us to keep watch for his coming because we don't know when it will happen. He commands us to live as if it is a certainty, behaving as though we know that we will be judged not by the standards of this world but by the standards of his kingdom. The English word hope is always positive but the Greek ἐλπίς [elpis] can also reflect an expected negative future event.

When Jesus talks about his return, the picture he paints doesn't seem too rosy for those that live according to the standards and values of this world rather than those of his kingdom. The hope of eternal life never seems to be too far from judgment when Jesus talks about it. Perhaps the best lesson we can draw from all of this is the same as St Augustine did when he said we should pray like everything depended on God and work like everything depended on us.

And if we are really going to live like Augustine suggests, we are going to need a lot of hope. It feels like hope has been in short supply this year. The numbers of deaths from Covid 19 are growing so large that they start to obscure the pain that each individual death brings for a family. This is on top of those who will have long-term aftereffects like permanent lung damage. So why should we have hope?

I think the best answer I can offer today is Christmas. It can be easy to overlook the astonishing event that we celebrate in just a few weeks. God was found in human form, in the person of an infant - vulnerable and dependent. God didn't come in the person of Jesus because everything was perfect, quite the opposite. The world needed a saviour. Jesus came for us and for our salvation.

In Jesus, God dealt with sin and holds out to the world reconciliation and healing. As Peter will soon remind us, Christ's command to remember him in bread and wine was given to us on the night he was betrayed. The Eucharist was not given to the Church because everything was perfect, it was given on the night when sin in the world was at its thickest.

We can have hope because God has already acted decisively in a world beset with sin. God comes to us again today in a world still beset with sin not because we deserve it but because God loves God's world. Our hope, our sure and certain hope, is that the love of God known in Jesus will rule over the entire world.

The way that Jesus comes again might well surprise us. It might be even more surprising than the form of a baby. Jesus tells us to learn the lesson of the fig tree. The coming of the seasons is accompanied by signs. I wonder if even now, in this world of suffering, we might see signs that the fig tree is putting out its leaves.

Perhaps global cooperation to produce vaccines faster than has ever been possible before is a green leaf. Simple acts of kindness might tell us that God's kingdom is not as far away as we might think. Jesus' faithfulness to his promise to meet us in this sacrament should, I think, give us hope.

I pray that in this Advent season, God would give us expectant hearts that we would watch and wait with genuine hope. I pray that we would see green leaves that signal the arrival of God's kingdom. I pray that God would give us hope that we might continue to pray as if it's up to God and to work as if it's up to us. Amen.