

First Sunday of Advent – some reflections on the readings and the season

Dear sisters and brothers,

A new Church year begins on Sunday, for Christians surely a more important beginning than the new calendar year on 1st January? Advent is a season of expectation and preparation though nowadays has to cope with being celebrated amid the commercial pressure of these times that create an unfortunate ever-earlier anticipation of Christmas. In Advent we do prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ in history over 2,000 years ago, but even more important, we are called to focus on the Christ who is always coming to us and in so many ways in our lives today and will come to us in the future. In a sense we are always in Advent, living as we do between the life of Jesus on earth and his coming at the end of time. Our fundamental Advent prayer is 'Maranatha – Our Lord Come!' This should not lead us into some sort of 'other-worldliness' or expectation of the sudden end of the world but to an effective and expectant engagement with life, the world and all its doings with a generous love and a strong and forward-looking faith, just as Paul urges of his readers in this Sunday's second reading.

Jeremiah 33: 14 – 16

The promise of God in chapter 23 is repeated here, probably by a later editor of the prophecies of Jeremiah. The failures and faithlessness of Judah and Israel which caused them to be conquered and exiled have not stopped God from loving them. For God's love is unconditional. A brighter future is promised to encourage the people to remain faithful amid signs that many of them were ready to give up on their covenant with God and their religious heritage and become as other nations. So here is a vision of a restored Davidic kingdom. Of course, it never came to pass in that way. But we Christians understand that Jesus is that king, of the Branch or stem of David, whose reign is universal and everlasting.

Psalm 25

This is an acrostic psalm. The order of ideas may have been partly governed by the initial Hebrew letters of the verses. There are several other such psalms. Here, the prayers alternate between praise of God's forgiveness and the psalmist's admission of his own and others' sinfulness.

1 Thessalonians 3: 9 – 13

Thessalonica was the capital of Macedonia, a port city strategically located between Rome and Byzantium (Istanbul today). Paul's letter to the Christians there may well be his earliest, and therefore, it is probably the earliest of Christian writings and of the New Testament. The community is needing encouragement in their difficulties, which have been reported to Paul by Timothy. Paul writes of his earnest desire to return to Thessalonica to help them, but being prevented from doing so for some time he proceeds to address some of their issues in the following chapter. First, he assures them of his constant prayers and reminds them of the approaching 'Parousia' (Advent, coming of the Lord, the Day of Christ's return) which at this stage he clearly thought would be soon. He prays that they might prepare for this by living holy lives and loving one another.

Luke 21: 25 – 36

Using the apocalyptic imagery we met in the book of Daniel, Luke tells of Jesus warning that the Son of Man is coming on 'a cloud' with power and great glory. This passage also draws on other Old Testament verses (e.g., Isaiah 13: 10 and Psalm 65: 8 – 9). Here, the cloud may refer to the Transfiguration and the Ascension clouds that were signs of Jesus' presence in glory and the promise of his coming again. The Son of Man, the Human One, the Christ would return not to gather his elect from the earth but to set the Christians free on the earth. It is to be a time of conversion, of liberation, of the visible presence of the kingdom of God. The warning signs that are described are not of terror or the end of the world but of hope for a new world, a new creation under God for the earth.

A prayer for this Sunday:

Lord our God, we are your people on the march who try to carry out the task of giving shape to your kingdom of justice, love and peace.

When we are discouraged and afraid, keep us going forward in hope. Make us vigilant in prayer, that we may see the signs of your Son's coming. May Jesus walk with us here and now on the road that he has shown us, that he may lead us to you, our living God for ever and ever. Amen.

Wishing you every blessing for Sunday and the coming week,

With my love and prayers,

John