

Advent 2, 2021, Pusey House, Mass
The Principal
2 Kings 22.8-10, 23.1-3, Romans 15.4-13, Luke 21.25-33
Our Hope in Christ

Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning; that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.

....

Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled. Heaven and earth shall pass away; but my words shall not pass away.

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The hope of Advent is focussed on the person of the Lord Jesus. In particular, hope of Advent is the hope shaped and fed by the coming of Christ. Last week we contemplated him coming to Jerusalem to at the beginning of Week of his passion, the King, ‘meek and sitting on ass and a colt’, Hosanna in the highest. But this is not just a past event. The Lord Jesus comes to us now, in a way that this past event enables us to recognize – he comes to his people, he comes to his Church, he comes as the Bridegroom of our souls. He comes meek and lowly in human words, he comes in the weak signs of bread and wine, he comes to teach, to feed, to cleanse. The Lord who comes does not force himself on us, we need to go out to meet him, as we sang last evening in the Antiphons for Advent, to seek to find him who first comes to us.

This week, His words to his disciples, his speech to us today, points us forward, to his second coming, -- ‘he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the idea’. This is a sobering promise, but it is, after all, a promise, not a threat. What does this promise for the future tell us of our Lord’s coming to us now?

The American theologian Stanley Hauerwas described this hope with help of a book written by a shepherd in the Lake District, James Rebanks. In one passage, Mr Rebanks describes lying on his back next to a stream on a fine spring day, with ‘the clouds racing by ... [and] the ewes calling to the lambs to follow them through the rocky crags; and he thinks: “This is my life. I want for no other.”¹

“THIS is my life. I want for no other” describes a hope that is not just waiting for some future thing, but a hope which draws the reality of future promise into the present. This is a hope incarnate and made real and present in the dynamic particulars of our lives in the body of Christ.

Hauerwas argues that ‘the scarcity of this declaration, “THIS is my life. I want for no other” is a clue to understanding our cultural moment’. Contemporary society struggles to tell us what we are made for, what we are meant to be. The promise of an abundance of choice cannot replace a lack of clarity about what we are seeking in our

¹ *The Shepherd’s Life: Modern dispatches from an ancient landscape* (Flatiron Books, 2015), James Rebanks. Quotations are from the partial transcript in the *Church Times*, 4 Nov, 2016, No. 8016. A podcast of the complete lecture is on the St Martin in the Fields website. Monday 31 October, 7.00 pm, Stanley Hauerwas, ‘My neighbour, my nation and the presidential election’ in the lecture series: ‘Who is my neighbour? The Ethics of Global Relationships’ Autumn Lecture Series, September – November 2016
Speaking about what it means to be a neighbour, and alongside reflections on the presidential election, Hauerwas spoke a lot about what it might mean to inhabit a restored city characterized by joy.

choices.² It brings this criticism uncomfortably close to home. Dissatisfaction is not just a problem for the world, he argues, ‘The Church has failed to help people to live in such a manner that they would want no other life than the life they have lived.’

Well, I was not sure if I should even use this example, THIS is my life. I want for no other. Could this be the kind of weak optimism characteristic of a certain contemporary mythology? we can be or achieve whatever we will, things are getting better and better. This mythology can leave us empty and frustrated when it proves to be false. But I dare to share it here as an expression of the Advent hope. The Lord Jesus is the one in whom all things hold together. As we celebrated last evening, he is the wisdom who proceeds from the mouth of the Most High, the Father eternally speaking and begetting the Son, the wisdom reaching from one end to another, mightily and sweetly ordering all things. Closer to home, he is the one whose love and wisdom embrace our great joys, and our most destabilising sorrows, the things which we can barely look at or confess. In him, even disappointment, failure, and loss become the place of new life, a ladder connecting heaven and earth, the lowest depths and the heaven of heaven. As our lives are wrapped up in his, and as we come to know that, it may just be possible to say “THIS is my life. I want for no other”.

Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning; that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.

Reading the Scriptures, says Saint Paul, teaches us, furnishes our minds and souls. This reading shapes our patience, offers comfort, and gives hope.

We often find ourselves in some way in the place of the people described in our Old Testament lesson. Almost a hundred years after the prophecies of Isaiah which we heard last evening, the priests working to restore the life of the temple find the book of the law. This may have been the summing up of the law in book of Deuteronomy, 5th book of the Bible, or it may be a version of all these books. But we might ask, how could this law be lost? This is more than an historical question, it is a human question, and one that we know all too well. It’s possible to lose the very things we need to live well, or simply to forget what we once knew. We can never just possess the scriptures, they are living powers, alive by the Spirit of the One who lives forever. They are not in our control, and they must be rediscovered and re-read or they are somehow lost to us.

If you want to join us in our daily round of rediscovery, the readings for each day in Advent are printed on the back of the propers sheet, at the end of the notices. Each one of us can choose to embrace what St Paul offers, and make space for the shaping of our patience, the furnishing of our minds.

When we read the Bible together, we aren’t just getting information—we are developing a kind of stereoscopic vision. In the sweeping passages of Isaiah, we get a lot of historical detail mixed in with visions of the future, in the Gospel of Mark we encounter our Lord speaking more directly to us, acting for us. In the letters from the early Church we are being taught who to put these things together.

If this kind of reading is not part of your regular pattern, you could try to choose one of these series, Isaiah, Mark, or the letters for the remainder of Advent.

² When a certain ideal or fantasy of freedom promises almost infinite choice, but without offering an apprehension of the good or the end which would give substance to these choices, then unease replaces the contentment to which the shepherd James Rebanks gives voice, and which should characterize the heavenly city.

In the words of Dr Pusey, Scripture shares in the vastness of the universe, the events recorded there, ‘All have bearings every way; all belong to a vast system of which we have some glimpses’. At the same time these particulars all bear ‘in some way upon Him, the Sun and centre of the system, our Incarnate LORD’.

We are invited to read of our lives in the same way, to discern where God is acting or seeks to act. We are invited to go out to meet Christ who is coming now, to find our way to the place where we can say, this is my life and I want no other. The Scriptures invite us to a two-fold attentiveness—they invite us to look with a sober and careful eye on what is happening around us and within us, but also to discern the Sun and Centre of the system. The way we read the Bible invites us to recognize the different ways Christ comes to his people. This way of reading helps us to recognize his voice amid the noise of many voices, to recognize his loving purposes for us in the circumstances which seem to dash our hope.

Perhaps you think I’m avoiding the most challenging portion of our readings for today. Who can we take seriously what our Lord says to his disciples sitting with him near the temple in Jerusalem.

Jesus says to his disciples: ***This generation shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled: heaven and earth shall pass away; but my words shall not pass away.***

There is a way of reading this passage which suggests that the Lord Jesus here displays the infirmity of human nature. He just as a human being didn’t know what would happen after his going away. I think that this approach is a dead end, thought which ends at the death of Jesus. What might we find or learn about our Advent hope if we take these words as true?

Our Lord just predicted the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. ‘When will these things come to pass?’ ask the shocked disciples. The Lord Jesus does not give them a date and a time. Instead, he speaks of the signs, and of turmoil and terrible hardship, that will accompany the destruction of the temple.

The temple and city were destroyed within 40 years of Christ speaking, before that generation had passed away.³ But our Lord’s words continue to speak after they are fulfilled the first time. his description of current events, “become a window through which to see” a much more distant future, to see the end of the world as we know it and the coming of the Son of Man.⁴ The destruction of Jerusalem is a “transparent object in the foreground through which he sees the last events before the End.”⁵

We could go on here to consider all that is implied in the promise that Christ will come again, that he will come in a way that cannot be confused. Everyone, the whole world, will recognize that the one who comes is the Lord and Judge who both sets things right and brings his work of re-creation to completion. This is not a threat, but a promise: our longing for justice, for things to be put right, will finally be fulfilled. We could also consider this promise in relation to what the scientists of our day say about the end of the world, but that would take us in a different direction. Instead, How do our Lord’s

³ After Jewish patriots occupied the city [66 ad], a Roman army was sent to reclaim Jerusalem. After a long and bitter siege, the Romans retook the city in 70 ad. The temple was destroyed, and the city walls were levelled.

⁴ Frederick D. Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary. Volume 2: The Christbook*, p. 473.

⁵ Cranfield, *Mark*, p. 405, in Bruner, p. 474.

words describe his third coming, not in the past, or in a distant future, but now?

‘Heaven and earth shall pass away’. Christmas, the Nativity of our Lord, is the great festival of affirmation. God takes on flesh, God unites himself with matter, with the world of space and time. The Incarnation invites us to see God in all things beautiful, good, and true:

‘Eternal wisdom is tasted in everything that is capable of being tasted ... It is the beauty in everything beautiful. It is the thing longed for in every longing. And so on for all the things that are desirable.’⁶

We could speak about the dangers of false worship here, the false worship represented by the idols which the young King Josiah had removed from the temple in Jerusalem and which are still with us. Or, we could consider why Christmas is so difficult for many, what leads to anguish or disappointment in a time of celebration.

Advent coming before Christmas suggests that the time of affirmation, Christmas, requires the way of negation, Advent, a time of repentance, a cleansing, a purification.

‘Heaven and earth shall pass away’:

The point is this: For all of us, and for each one of us individually, this world, and the things of this world must pass away, not just in some vague, remote and unimaginable future, but right now. They are passing things; that is their very nature. They are passing things, and they are passing away even as we grasp them in our hands. No cleverness, no wishful thinking, no advanced technology can make them anything other than transitory things.⁷

The paradox is that in recognizing the passing character of things that we are enabled to love them and cherish them. One way of characterizing maturity or wisdom is the capacity to judge or see things against a larger backdrop. We are invited to see things in the context of the wisdom which stretches from one end to another.

‘This is my life I want know other’. This is the affirmation of Christmas, but it is shaped by the hope of Advent. Each of us must find it for ourself, and yet we can help each other on the way to that finding. Go ye out to meet him and say, art thou he that should come? For me, for us, for the world. To find our way to this affirmation, we travel by the way of negation, Advent precedes Christmas. Christ comes to cleanse his Church, and he comes to cleanse our souls. He is coming now today. We don’t have to work it out all at once, or by ourselves. This is what we are living together day by day and week by week.

We can say that this is my life and I want no other it is because we find our lives to be the place of encounter with the Lord Jesus in whom all things hold together, not just in heaven and earth, but for ourselves.

Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.

⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, ‘The Layman on Wisdom’, in *The Layman on Wisdom and the Mind*, trans M. L. Führer, Dovehouse Editions, Canada, p. 27, see also D B Hart, *The Beauty of Infinite* 255. ‘The tendency of what is created to reveal the divine points back to the power of God the Word to express Himself – and so it points back to the pleasure of the creator; and the Word itself points back to the relationship of expression within the Godhead, to the Father’s joy in begetting’. Von Balthasar in Hart, *Beauty of Infinite* 254

⁷ Robert Crouse, ‘Sermon for Advent 2’, www.lectionarycentral.com.