

The Nearness of the Second Coming, and Hope¹

A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, at the High Mass on Sunday, 8 December 2013 (The Second Sunday of Advent), by The Reverend Dr George Westhaver, Principal of Pusey House

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. ST. MATTHEW 24.34-35

ADVENT is a time of expectation and hope. This hope and expectation are both responses to the coming of Christ. Most obviously, we prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ in the flesh, the Word of God born in obscurity in Bethlehem. This is not just a kind of remembering, in the same way that celebration of the Eucharist is not just a remembering. In both cases, we can speak of participating and partaking. We are not just distant spectators. By God's grace, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we both find Christ in Bethlehem and discover Him in the sacrament. We worship the Word wrapped in swaddling clothes, and the same Word speaks to us in the human words of Scripture. We feed on Christ in the sacrament, and we feed, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest, the Eternal Word clothed in the human words of the Scriptures, both manifest and hidden.

In other words, we don't just remember Christ's coming, or look forward to it – rather, we rejoice in it, we celebrate His third coming, His coming in the present, His coming to the world, the Church, and the soul. Fr Barry helped us to consider this last week: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord, The words which greeted Christ on his entrance to Jerusalem are words we sing at celebration of the Eucharist. Today, Christ comes to Jerusalem, He comes to the Holy City which is His Church, and He comes to the temple which is the human soul. He casts out false forms of valuation and false loves so that both our souls and the Church may be ordered by the exchange of divine and human love and by business of prayer.

In Advent, we also look forward to Christ's second coming. This is one of the more perplexing parts of Christian teaching. In the Nicene Creed that follows this sermon, we will confess that Christ "shall come again with

¹ Based on John Henry Newman's Sermon: Sermon 17. Waiting for Christ "He who testifieth these things, saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus." Rev. xxii. 20.

glory to judge both the quick and the dead.” When Christ came the first time, it was possible to wonder and to doubt if God were indeed come. At the second coming, this will not be a question. 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. But can we really take this second coming seriously? And if we take it seriously, what difference does it make in our lives?

The Gospel account from St Luke (Chapter 21) is the Lord Jesus’ answer to those questions. Christ tells the disciples to expect the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. But then He connects the political and religious upheaval of the Roman invasion with the upheaval of the whole world. He is sitting with His disciples on the Mount of Olives, at the gates of Jerusalem, at the very place where many expected the Messiah to appear. St Matthew tells us that the disciples ask Him: “*What shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?*” (Matthew 24.4). Christ describes the signs of His coming. He also warns His disciples that they cannot know the exact time of His coming. And yet it is clear from the New Testament that the first followers of Jesus expected Him to return very soon. And this expectation is one of the reasons which makes it hard for Christians today to take the New Testament message about the second coming of Christ very seriously. Over 2000 years later, and He has not come. And if He did not come when He was expected, why is it important that this doctrine about the second coming of Christ be a part of our Creed, our basis statement of Christian hope?

This gap between the First and Second Coming may make it feel like God is far off. But there is a big difference between what it meant to look for the First Coming, and what it means to wait for the Second Coming. Before Christ came in the flesh, there was a series of revelations, one building on the other. Each prophet added something to the education of the people of Israel, and to the preparation for the coming of the Messiah: we heard some of this in power point form in our epistle. The chosen people were told that they would wait for the Saviour. In the time of Abraham and Sarah, Moses, in the time of King David and Solomon, in the time of Daniel and his three friends, God’s people learned in different ways that they were a people both in God’s hand, and a people in waiting. They were waiting for the fullness of time. But once Christ had come, this work was complete. Christ told His disciples that the Spirit would lead them into all truth, but the fullness of this truth was already given in Him and in His words and His life. The kingdom was still to be prayed for and waited for, but the kingdom was in a new way really and truly present. This means that the

Second Coming is not only in the future, but the coming of Christ is near at hand.

John Henry Newman described this change in the way we measure time:

... though time intervene between Christ's first and second coming, it is not recognized ... in the Gospel scheme. This is the truth of apostle's expectation. Since the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, God's eternity, Christ's coming, is always near.

Newman described this change as time changing direction, changing course:

... up to Christ's coming in the flesh, the course of things ran straight towards that end, nearing it by every step; but now, under the Gospel, that course has ... altered its direction, as regards His second coming, now [the course of things] runs, not towards the end, but along it, and on the brink of it; and is at all times equally near that great event... Christ, then, is ever at our doors; as near eighteen hundred years ago as now, and not nearer now than then; and not nearer when He comes than now.

In other words, it is not as if Heaven and the Second Coming are only distant things in some unknown future, far off ahead of us. Rather, it is that although Christ is gone from us, He is also returning, first by His Resurrection, but then by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. He is as near as the Sacrament of Holy Communion: *Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord*; He is as near as the proclamation of the eternal Word in human words: *Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away*. He is as near as the Spirit which joins us into one in the body of Christ.

“the course of things ...has altered its direction, and runs, not towards the end, but along it, and on the brink of it; ...Christ, then, is ever at our doors”.

This touches only on one element of the Second Coming and the nearness of Christ. But I want to suggest very briefly two ways this can guide us. First, both Christ and the Apostles warn their disciples and warn us that even though there will be signs of the Second Coming, predicting when it will happen is virtually impossible. Moreover, it is supposed to be that way. Christ encourages us to wait, to live in His presence, but not to be preoccupied or paralysed by trying to know what God in His wisdom keeps hidden from us. And yet, at the same time, there is something important in the attitude which Christ encourages by the description He gives of His Second Coming. Christ and the Apostles teach us to discern signs of His presence in both the natural world, and in the social and political world. In day-to-day events, in the most ordinary or strange things, in the good weather which encourages us or brings happiness, in the bad

weather which causes upset, in prosperity which we enjoy, or in the turmoil of political or economic crises, in all things, we are encouraged to see tokens of Christ's providence, His mercy, and His wisdom. Here again, the circumstances of Christ's first coming speak to us of His coming in the presence: "*He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew him not.*" Or, in Newman's words again:

So it is now. He still is here; He still whispers to us, He still makes signs to us. But His voice is so low, and the world's din is so loud, and His signs are so covert, and the world is so restless, that it is difficult to determine when He addresses us, and what He says.²

Here we can see the importance of Christ's words, *Heaven and earth shall pass away; but my words shall not pass away*. We are not to make the signs of the times or the upheavals of the world a substitute for faith. That is what superstition is. Instead, we learn to discern God's presence by the guidance of the words which witness to the Eternal Word. During these past few weeks, we have been reading the prophet Isaiah at Morning Prayer, and his description of the turmoil in Jerusalem and Judah. Isaiah helps the people to see what is happening. It is clear that many people in his day are just like the people in our day: they could see political crises, and the opportunity for getting wealthy, they could see dangers to their security, and the power of armies and rulers, but they could not see very well the providence of God, sweetly and wisely ordering all things in the form of the Cross.

The Second Coming describes an event which is still future to us. But a future is always near. Christ's coming again is not only something in the distant future, it is the substance of life in the Spirit:

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.

² [it is a common and strengthening experience that many people]{Religious men} cannot but feel, in various ways, that His providence is guiding them and blessing them personally, on the whole; yet when they attempt to put their finger upon the times and places, the traces of His presence disappear. Who is there, for instance, but has been favoured with answers to prayer, such that, at the time, he has felt he never could again be unbelieving? Who has not had strange coincidences in his course of life which brought before him, in an overpowering way, the hand of God? Who has not had {249} thoughts come upon him with a sort of mysterious force, for his warning or his direction?