

The Bridegroom Comes

A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, at the High Mass on Sunday, 30 November 2014 (Advent Sunday) by The Reverend Dr George Westhaver, Principal of Pusey House

MICAH 4:1-7, Ps. 25:1-9, ROMANS 13:8-14, ST. MATTHEW 21:1-13

And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. ROMANS 13.11

TODAY is the first day of the Church's new year. At the beginning of the Church year, we hear a spiritual alarm clock: now, it is high time to awake out of sleep. We find this call to 'Wake up' in many places in the Bible. God's people are often pictured as struggling to wake up, to leave the world of dreams to come into the bright light of the day. It is a dangerous situation; people who are half-asleep are in danger falling into the hands of their enemies, or simply losing their way.

We find one picture of this danger in T. S. Eliot's poem *The Wasteland* (1922). Eliot describes the London crowds as sleepwalking to their doom:

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.

Eliot's image is meant to shock – we could be part of that very crowd.

The Beat-Poet Allan Ginsburg offers another kind of picture of a people that have been undone, who are lost. He begins his poem 'Howl' (1955) with a description of a world gone mad:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked
...

In this poem, the alarm clock is not a symbol of waking up to the bright light of day, but a sign of unreality. The people who recognise the death in the faces of the crowd flowing over London bridge in Elliott's poem, the 'best minds' of Ginsberg's poem, try to escape, they

threw their watches off the roof to cast their ballot for an Eternity outside of Time, & alarm clocks fell on their heads every day for the next decade,

There is something perceptive in this description. The call to wake up that we hear at the beginning of Advent is not a call to be more efficient and useful, better-oiled cogs in the machine. There is more than one way to fall asleep to God's purposes, and the world we live in shows us that the most effective drug can be what sometimes counts as success and prosperity.

The choice of the Gospel for today can help us to see that things are not as they seem; that we, too, may be half-asleep. Why are we reading a lesson which seems to belong to Palm Sunday on the first Sunday of the year? The entry of Christ into Jerusalem belongs to the story of his passion and death, doesn't it? It's not a pre-Christmas reading. The Gospel describes the way in which Christ enters into Jerusalem for the last time at the end of His three years of public ministry:

And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the Son of David; Blessed is he that cometh in the Name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest.

We are invited today to share in the people's gladness. The Bible accounts show us that the people who welcomed Christ expected the Messiah to free them from the Romans and to make Israel a strong nation again. This didn't happen, and Christ told His closest followers that they were wrong to expect it. But if they were confused about what Christ would accomplish, they were right to look to Him. We must start there also, however confused our hopes are. The desire for a Saviour or a Mighty Deliverer may have many parts. Perhaps it is simply a sense that things are not as they ought to be, that our lives could be better. Perhaps we recognise elements of our experience in Ginsberg's description of a people ruled by clocks and schedules, with not enough space to breathe. Or: do we see our own reflection in Eliot's description of the tired faces in the crowd? Perhaps we simply find ourselves making the wrong choices over and over again, or stuck where we don't want to be.

Blessed is he that cometh in the Name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest.

The liturgy can help us to appreciate why this is an account which belongs to Advent. These are the words which we pray and sing whenever we celebrate the Eucharist: Blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord. Advent is the season of the coming of Christ. We prepare to celebrate His first coming, and we look forward to His second coming. However, in using the words with which the crowds greeted the Lord when He entered Jerusalem, we also proclaim that Christ is coming now: Blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord.

When Christ came to the Holy City, He came meek and lowly and sitting upon an ass, and a colt, the foal of an ass. There were no signs or clues that the man on the donkey was the King of Kings. In the Sacrament of Holy Communion, Christ comes to the Holy City; He comes to His Church. The very ordinary creatures of bread and wine conceal the King in the same way that the lowly creatures on which He sat veiled his glory at His first coming. Every time we pray and sing, ‘Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord’, we are invited to wake up out of sleep, to open our eyes to what is there to be known and received, but what is hidden until our faith is woken up. Let me encourage you not just to listen to the choir sing, but to pray with them. Pray with expectation that the Lord is indeed coming and will come to His Church and to the Temple of your soul.

Jerusalem is never just a city in the Bible. It is the home of God’s people, and it is a promise for the future. The temple in Jerusalem is a prophetic image of the Church, the Temple of God, and also of the human soul, the temple of the Holy Spirit: ‘Know ye not’, says St Paul, ‘that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you?’

If we believe that we are temples of the Holy Spirit, then it will not surprise us that we can learn something important from Christ’s visit to the temple which serves as the picture for our souls and for the Church. The problem our Lord finds is not that the people were engaged in trade and commerce, but that trade and commerce had taken over the life of the Temple: ‘It is written, my House shall be called a house of prayer, but ye have made it a den of thieves.’ The work of the temple of God, the work of the soul, is prayer. Now we can hear in our Lord’s words a simple statement about the importance of praying, of coming to Church regularly, of receiving the Sacrament of Holy Communion. All these things are important, but something far more all-encompassing is there. This passage does not teach us the importance of having some little part of our life dedicated to God, or keeping some room in our souls as a sort of prayer room. That’s the kind of thinking that makes God into a taskmaster who wants us working to the clock. But God doesn’t want a little piece of us, he wants all of us. The true work of the temple of God is the life of prayer. This implies not something that we do at certain times of the day or week, but it implies, rather, letting God’s purposes order our lives: “The true business of the city, the Church, of the Temple, the individual soul, is prayer. In its most fundamental sense, praying means willing God’s will,

which is love. Anything short of this is a sort of robbery”;¹ this was what was put before us succinctly in the epistle:

and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

When our lives are ordered by this love, we don't have to escape from a schedule which is already too full to find God. Rather, we expect to find our Lord not only in the Sacrament of the Altar, or in His Word written, but in so many promptings of the Spirit and in the signs of His Providence. Christ is coming to our souls now, by grace. He comes in the promptings which help us to see and to choose the higher over the lower; He comes in the desire, however weary or feeble, we have to follow out the signs of His purposes for us; and He comes when we are given grace to put on the Lord Jesus Christ when so many other kinds of garments are on offer.

The life of prayer and the services of the Church are meant to serve this more all-encompassing purpose. Each day in the chapel next door, we gather here to listen and to meditate on God's word to us in Scripture at Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. Tomorrow, we start to read the prophet Isaiah, the prophet who some of the Fathers said was more like an evangelist than a prophet, more like an eye-witness to Christ's work than one who saw from a distance. The daily reading of the Bible, daily prayer, is like an exercise programme which helps us both to recognise the ways in which our lives can become like the disordered Temple that Jesus visited, and to learn how to discern God's purposes and mercy in the midst of struggle. The work of daily prayer and Bible reading is an extension of the visit of Christ to the Temple in Jerusalem: He comes to the Temple of His Church, to the Temple of our souls: to shine a light, to cleanse, and to re-order.

It is the emphasis on Judgement which makes Advent a serious and sombre season. The Second Coming of Christ is put before us especially in the Gospel for next Sunday. But we need to be clear that that the coming of Christ is not a threat, but a promise. The Lord Jesus comes to the holy city not to destroy it, but to provide a new foundation on which to build a restored and redeemed community. He comes to the Temple not to tear it down, but to cleanse it. Our Redeemer comes not to destroy, but to cleanse our hearts, that He may dwell there. Make no mistake, the cleaning up of our souls involves real discomfort and confusion. The danger is that we

¹ *Advent Meditations*, The Reverend Dr Robert D. Crouse, Originally presented by Dr. Robert Crouse for the Prayer Book Society of Canada, Nova Scotia/Prince Edward Island Branch Advent 2002 Institute, held at St. George's Round Church, November 30, 2002; <http://www.lectionarycentral.com/advent1/Crouse1to4.html>.

would rather cling to what robs God and our neighbour than to embrace the painful and wonderful cleansing of our souls. It is that rejection that makes judgement sound like a bad word. Brothers and sisters, this is a real danger. The call to 'Wake up', to go out to meet Christ who comes, is both a burden and a promise. But if we can bear the discomfort and trial of being displeasing to ourselves, then the Lord who came to the Temple will also be the Saviour and Helper who finds a home in our souls:

Let us pray: Visit and cleanse, we beseech thee, O Lord, the hearts of thy people, that when thy Son of our Lord Jesus Christ comes, today, and at His second coming to judge the quick and the dead, He may find in us a mansion and a temple prepared for Himself: through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who with thee and the Holy Ghost liveth and reigneth, one God, world without end. Amen.