

Homily for Advent Sunday

A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, on Sunday 28 November 2010 (Advent Sunday), by Fr Nicholas King SJ

WHAT time is it? There are several possible answers to this question. Bleary-eyed, you may find yourself reasoning that this is Sunday Eucharist and at Pusey House, and the interminable sermon is just beginning, so it must be somewhere after 11.00 in the morning.

Or, if your taste is for the impenetrable jargon with which Oxford keeps the outside world at bay, you might mutter that it is Sunday of 8th week of Michaelmas Term (“and”, you urge, “I have two essays to blag before Friday, so get on with it”).

Or, you might argue, “those elegant and discreetly secular decorations have appeared in the Corn and the High, there are kitsch renderings of Christmas carols playing in the shops; you have already written your letter to Santa Claus. So it must be Christmas”.

For us, gathered here at this particular moment in this particular Church, the answer has to be “none of the above”. For we have today entered into the dark time of Advent. It is dark in the sense that there is just a glimmer of light at the end of the very long tunnel; and without the dark, we shall not be able to see the light when it finally comes. Advent, you do not need me to tell you, means “Coming”. That which is coming, you see, has not yet arrived. And what is it that is “coming”? Or rather not “what”, but “who?”.

For it is Christ whose coming we await, nervously and joyfully; and the ancient Christian tradition understands that coming in three ways. There is, first, that coming at Christmas to which we shall give a more or less joyful welcome, four weeks from now. Secondly, with a less complacent nervousness, there is that “Second Coming”, the Son of Man returning in glory and asking of us an account of what we have been up to, how much we have loved. Thirdly, there is that coming that may take place at any time at all: the homeless beggar in St Giles whom you will talk to tomorrow, the unexpectedly graced encounter with someone from across our artificial boundaries - ethnic, or religious, or social - that turns out to be a Spirit-filled meeting with Christ. Or the old person you will visit this week in hospital, who will turn out to be the means of Jesus Christ’s coming to you.

And what will this coming look like? Today's readings offer some clues. In the first reading, the time is in one sense Isaiah's 7th Century BC. In that century the prophet is attempting to waken his compatriots and co-religionists to what time it really is, as they struggle with God's demands on them, and their fears of the military and political threat of Assyria. To those fearful and distracted people he offers a vision: it is a time for them to see wonderful things, and these wonderful things come under three headings. First, there is the startling vision of the "Mountain of the House of the Lord", which is to be "higher" than the mountains around it. And, as you will know if you have been to Jerusalem, it simply is not. Or not yet.

Second, he offers us the vision of a response from the Gentiles (that is us, of course), who will come flooding into Jerusalem, because they see the answer there to their deepest longings, "that the Lord may teach us his ways".

And third, there is a vision of peace, as the prophet sings the beautiful song, "neither shall they learn war any more", as they batter their nuclear bombs into ploughshares and their aircraft carriers into pruning hooks. That is a vision of a new world, one that we are still far from building, a world of justice, love, and peace.

In the second reading, we eavesdrop as Paul performs a delicate diplomatic two-step; he is speaking to the divided Roman Church, where he clearly knows of tension between Jewish Christians and their Gentile brothers and sisters. Here, the idea of "time" simply cannot be avoided: he speaks of "the right time", "time to wake up" (the end of a lengthy sermon, you may feel), a time when "the night has advanced and the Day has drawn near" (and does he mean the daylight or God's Day? Paul is not saying). It is, he says, a time to put aside the "ways of darkness" (and as you heard the list he offers, you may have been quietly dropping all those plans you had made for aptly celebrating Eighth Week). It is a time, finally "to put on the ways of light", and, as always with Paul, there must be talk of his Beloved, as he implores them to "put on" (and he is using the metaphor drawn from the Greek stage, of an actor "putting on" his character), "put on the Lord Jesus Christ". That is what time it is.

And what of the gospel? In the gospel that you have just heard, there is little for our comfort, you may indignantly feel. For it is time, it seems, to enter the Ark. Advent means that there is no such thing as "Ordinary Time"; always and at every moment there is the invitation to encounter God and the Christ whom he has sent, will send, always continues to send. It is not a time, whatever your plans may be for the forthcoming vacation, for

marrying and giving in marriage, for eating and drinking; for the flood is on its way.

So: what of you this morning? Your task, your invitation, your right, and also the duty that you have taken upon yourself by coming here today, is to go out from here to deliver a message; you have not heard God's invitation if you go out in dismissive contempt for the rest of humanity, "I thank you, Lord, that I am not like them", as the Pharisee puts it. Your task today, and during the week, is to show by the very way that you live that Christ is on his way, and that you can meet him on Monday morning. That is what time it is: a time to wake from sleep.