

University Sermon on Advent Sunday, 3 December 2006

Christ Church Cathedral: Isaiah 51 : 4-11; Rom 13 : 11 – end

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Advent, we are told, is the time of waiting. Yet why are we waiting, and what are we waiting for? The children, of course, will tell us that it is Christmas, and in this they are not far off the mark. Yet to those who are not in the fortunate position to enjoy, on this occasion, things that have been prepared for them, those for whom Christmas primarily means yet another burden to shoulder in a life already packed with obligations – to those it may seem appropriate to ask why we are supposed to wait, during the weeks of Advent, for Christmas and not rather – for Christmas to be over? Christmas does not, of course, stand for turkey, stockings and pudding only. At Christmas Christians remember the birth of Christ, their saviour, and with that the reconciliation between God and the world. So it is this advent, this arrival we are awaiting; during the weeks preceding Christmas Christians wait for the coming of Jesus. Yet this, it seems, occurred 2000 years ago; it would not seem to make much sense to wait, each year, for something that, in fact, has long taken place. Even the most faithful could be forgiven for doubting the wisdom of such an exhortation. And indeed this is not how the Church has understood the meaning of Advent. The arrival of Christ that Christians are called to wait for not only, but specifically during the weeks before Christmas is his second, his future coming.

This is why the reading we have heard from St Paul's Epistle to the Romans is especially associated with Advent Sunday. For it speaks of this expectation:

'Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand'. These are words of hopeful waiting spoken in the anticipation that

things are going to change. Perhaps not within the four-week period of one Advent season, but certainly within the foreseeable future. This has been the hope of the apostle and, as far as we know, of the first Christians generally; Christ would return and fulfil his reign of glory all over the world, and this was to happen soon.

So far, it seems, this hope has failed to materialise. All the adverse conditions that made the early Christians expect an imminent change to the world, war, suffering, oppression, cruelty, and disbelief have persevered. So has all this waiting been in vain? Are we really, as St Paul suggests any 'nearer' to salvation than when we or, in fact, when they first believed? Or are we rather like Vladimir and Estragon, the two characters in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, for whom the fiction of waiting for something or someone, who in fact never turns up, masks the cruel reality of eternal recurrence? Waiting for some imagined future there seems to justify ignoring the present, seems a way of closing one's eyes to reality. Christianity has had its fair share of precisely this criticism, it has been charged to be the 'illusory happiness of the people' who know no real happiness and, indeed, the opium of the people.

It would, perhaps, be disingenuous to claim that this charge was altogether unfounded when it was first made, but it is equally clear that the opposite of that aberration, the loss of anything to wait or hope for, the utter reduction to life in the present, as it is experienced by those living in a state of material or spiritual drought, is, really and truly, desperation and ultimately the loss of humanity. Both, then, waiting for something to come and thereby losing touch with the present *and* being reduced to the present without any outlook into the future robs us of what we are meant to be. Being human means being conscious of living here and now, but it means also transcending this very moment, seeing it as a point in a history that started long ago and leads on to some goal in the future and gains meaning only as part of this development. Only if

we hold both together, present and future, are we able to enjoy our human time, the duration of a limited span of life in which we cannot do everything, but certain things we can and ought to do. Time is only real and precious for us if it has past, and present, and future. We must be able to understand our current situation as resulting from the past and leading to some future and project what we are waiting and hoping for as an extension of what has been and is now.

This, interestingly, brings us back to Advent and Christmas. Why has the waiting of the Church for the second coming of Christ not been idle? Why has it, for the most part, not resulted in a denial of the real, current situation of the world and of society? Why have Christians instead gone by their daily work and done acts of charity (though not all their acts have been driven by charity)? Why have they tried to improve the conditions of their societies (to whatever effect, admittedly)? The answer lies in their belief that the expected event would not be something altogether new, something in complete discontinuity with the present, but, on the contrary, merely the affirmation of something that had, in fact happened in the past and was evident in their own present. The object of Christian hope and Christian waiting, the 'day at hand' of which St Paul writes, will not bring something mysterious and totally unknown, but is merely the finishing touch to a development that has started long ago and has been brought on track irrevocably with the coming of Jesus in the 'fullness of time'.

Christians who know of this and understand the principle of this development have therefore no reason, and no justification, to sit back and let these things just occur. On the contrary, they are called to join forces, to become partners and co-workers in God's great scheme. Or, once more in the words of St Paul as we have heard them in the reading: 'Let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light.'

Waiting thus is no longer a merely detached, passive attitude. It involves our own, active commitment, using reason, determination and will, to support the growth of the principles of peace, faith, justice, and love that were started by the Incarnation.

Yet this must not make us forget our limits. We cannot bring about the full coming of the kingdom. This must be done by someone else, and we can only expect this patiently. So when we are waiting, during the weeks of Advent, we are, in reality, waiting for Christmas. The season that starts today is emblematic of our awareness that what started then has not as yet come to its full conclusion. The kingdom of God whose coming Jesus said was at hand is 'at hand' for us, but not more than that. The night is far gone for us as it was for St Paul – but it is still twilight. It is a time still that knows faith as well as doubt, peace as well as war, justice as well as injustice, love as well as hatred and that, therefore, needs the patience that our children know who, right now wait for Christmas.