

Reflection for Advent Sunday by Rev'd Peter Shaw

Today, we begin the season of Advent.

But what is Advent about, what actually do we mean by it?

Advent is a time when the themes of joyful expectation and devout conversion combine to prepare the faithful for the remembrance of the Lord's first coming in his incarnation and for his glorious coming at the end of time, note those words "and for his glorious coming at the end of time", for Advent is not concerned just about preparing ourselves for Christmas, it is also about focusing on the second coming of Christ – the "end time" – hence our Gospel reading today.

The word Advent is taken from the Latin *adventus* meaning "coming" and is a season of expectation and anticipation for the coming Messiah.

So what does Advent exhort us – encourage us - to do?

It was originally observed as a time of fasting and penitence, and in many ways has similarities with Lent, for as in Lent we focus on preparing ourselves for the dramatic events of the crucifixion and Resurrection at Easter, in Advent we focus on preparing ourselves for the coming the coming of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ at Christmas; born into this world; God made man, to be with us, to redeem us.

It is defined as a time of preparation, of self- reflection, of prayer – all focusing in anticipation on the time at Christmas and Christ's second coming. For Christians, it further encourages us to move our focus away from the world and focus on the coming of Jesus Christ and all that that means - it exhorts us to turn away from those things which keep us from God

Parts of the Old Testament are alive and buzzing, for want of a better phrase, about the coming of the Messiah, for as the prophet Jeremiah (33:14-16) tells us:

"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah." "In those days and at that time I will make a righteous branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety."

Jeremiah is prophesying about the hope for Jesus, the One who will redeem Israel, so evocatively expressed in such Advent hymns as "O come, O come, Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear."

But for the Jews of His day, it's a hope that Jesus both fulfills and disappoints; they heard Him - but did not listen.

In Luke 21, Jesus tells the people of the destruction of the temple and of Jerusalem. Earlier, the disciples had marvelled at its majesty. But Jesus replies, "*As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down*" (v6). He then goes on to say, "*When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains,*

let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city” (vv20-21).

With this sort of declaration, how does Jesus satisfy the hope declared in Jeremiah?

Well, He certainly fulfills it, but importantly He also breaks it and reshapes it to reflect God’s true love, something that was missing from people in the world of His day – as well as ours today.

This is important because as Christians we can sometimes teeter on the edge of fantasy, something which can be all too apparent at Christmas.

The tendency is to feel that our hope is already fulfilled; that we have received the promised gift of God in its fullness, and so now we can begin to rest. We can find peace and safety in that familiar Christmas story; Christ has arrived, and so there is nothing left for us to long for, nothing else to mourn, nothing else to desire, nothing left to anticipate.

But the first Sunday of Advent won’t let us do that, it won’t let us live as delusional Christians.

We must never forget that Christ will come again and as He tells us in today’s Gospel reading,

‘But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. “Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come”.

The very uncertainty of when Christ will come again is a strong stimulus to us to be ceaselessly watchful.

We must be watchful, ***“or else,”*** as Jesus tells us, ***“he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly”.***

It’s so easy to let this season of Advent become a time to let ourselves drift into a comfortable world of favorite carols and mulled wine beside cosy firesides, although this year with the Pandemic, Christmas is going to be very difficult for many people.

No, Christmas is not a time for fantasy.

Instead, Jesus calls us to be alert, to be ready for action. It’s a time of heightened sensitivity - to what’s going on around us in our world; a world affected by suffering caused by wars, starvation, poverty - sin – the pandemic, a world which frequently excludes God’s love.

Celebrations are in normal times wonderful and an important part of our lives - God wants us to enjoy ourselves – to get together with family and friends, to show our love and affection for our loved ones, friends and neighbours by sharing good times, giving gifts, pulling Christmas crackers. But this year, doing all this is going to be difficult if not impossible; indeed, we have not been able to see and hug our family since October of last year and we are unlikely to be able to do so until at least until May of next year. So this year getting together to celebrate for us, and I suspect many of you will be done virtually or by phone. So, let us all enjoy whatever connections we can manage with family and friends and share the love God has shared with us, but let us never forget those parts of His world which still do not know of His love – and play our part as Christians in bringing His love to those who do not know it.

There is much to do! Are we ready for action? Are we awake? **Amen**