

The First Sunday of Advent: a liturgical time or simple make-believe?
1st reading: Isaiah 63-64(various verses) May God reveal Himself to us again;
2nd reading: 1st Corinthians 1:3-9: Jesus is the that revelation we await;
Gospel: Mark 13:33-37: Stay awake! God will come when we least expect.

(Note: If you use a missal, we are now in church cycle B, where the gospels are usually from St Mark.) At the risk of sounding a wee bit trendy, I do think Advent is a bit of make-believe – a pretence that the Messiah has not come. This is deliberate: the Church wants us to “get under the skin” of the Old Testament people, who were in a confused mood – waiting for something to turn up, even though they were not quite sure what it might be.

In a strange way, our waiting for something important – the birth of a child, exam results, etc – is like how people felt near the end of the Old Testament era. We know that something will happen, but not exactly when, but we are sure that it will make an immediate difference to us. It is a mixture of weariness with the waiting, hoping for the best, and uncertainty about its long-term effect on us. Isaiah’s words sum this up: *Oh, that you would tear the heavens open and come down – at your presence, the mountains would melt.* That is strong stuff: it sums up both their despair at their plight, and their desperate hope for future intervention by God.

A deeper sort of optimism is shown by Paul in the 2nd reading: *“I never stop thanking God for all the graces you have received through Jesus Christ”*. He singles out those who taught and preached to the people the ‘good news’ of the gospel, so that they could be hopeful, while *“waiting for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed”*. In those early Christian days (about 57AD – less than 30 years after Jesus’ resurrection) many felt the world would soon end, with Jesus’ return in glory. As time went on, Paul and others realised that this would not be quite so soon, so they changed their religious teaching accordingly.

I sometimes find the gospel passage for this first Sunday of Advent disappointing. In all three years (A, B & C) the Church uses part of Jesus’ message about the end of the world. In the first 3 gospels, this bit comes just after Jesus’ entry to Jerusalem, and before the Last Supper. But I often wonder: where is the hope of Christmas? Where is John the Baptist? (Don’t worry – he arrives next weekend!) But, to be serious, I think that what the Church is telling us is that Jesus’ “coming” (which is what ‘Advent’ actually means) is on three different levels, and we should really not be trying to separate them.

His first arrival was physical, 2000 years ago, in the Christmas events we celebrate each December. There is also another coming, a spiritual one, which we do not see physically – his presence in the Church (that is, you and I), in her Sacraments and in our faith. For most of human history, this is the “real” presence of Jesus that matters most – it is why you are probably reading this via an RC parish website. We are the Body of Christ – his spiritual presence in the world. I know that this lacks the public appeal of the Christmas stories (especially with the popular links to carols, choirs, presents, snow, Santa, trees, etc) but it is what the gospel message is all about. Jesus IS here now – in us and in other believers, and his frequent messages about how we should treat each other reflect his concern for our well-being – he is part of us.

What, then, about his third arrival – at the end of time? This is much harder to discuss, because the early Church altered its language as time went by. As I wrote above, they came to see that Jesus’ final physical coming would not happen quickly. I see little point in over-dwelling on this idea, as we do not use that sort of language in our faith very much. In fact, for a long time, neither have most other Christians. All that we can say is that “the end of the world” comes for us when we each of us dies. The wars in Europe & the Middle East make this sadly relevant; it is also a fact which we older people cannot avoid!

So, what should we make of Advent this year? As we go through December, it gets dark ever earlier in the afternoon. We are aware of human weakness (in both moral and physical senses). In the liturgy, flowers disappear from the churches; purple vestments are worn; there is a sense that Advent (just the bare 3 weeks this year) is a sort of ‘mini-Lent’, when we should think seriously about the important things in life. It all sounds depressing! But there is hope on the horizon: in Jesus’ first coming, at Christmas, God stepped physically into our human history for about 33 years, and Jesus has stayed with us spiritually ever since – in his Church, and in you and me.

We live in a non-religious country now, so Jesus relies on us to ‘fly the flag’ for his presence in our midst. Let us appreciate the many good things we have, be grateful for them, and try our best share them with those who have far less. Those Old Testament people also looked forward to something, but they could never have guessed that God would send his divine Son - in a person who was both God and man - to show us how much he loves us. *Fr Jim Dunne.*

