

First Sunday of Advent: Year C: A Confused Message for us?

1st Reading: Jeremiah 33:14-16: God will fulfil his promises to his people;

2nd Reading: 1 Thess. 3:12-4:2: Paul's appeal: make spiritual progress;

Gospel: Luke 21:25-28+34-36: Jesus' warning about the future - watch!

(Bible quotations are now from the English Standard Version. Our bishops have ordered it to be used from this weekend, in preference to the Jerusalem version, in use since 1970.)

My title for this piece may grab your attention (almost tabloid-paper-style), but it mainly reflects my opinion about the readings every First Sunday of Advent: they are difficult for a preacher to relate to daily life. Of course, they are theologically “correct” (and similar to those of two weeks ago), in relating Jesus’ first coming (in humility, but fulfilling Old Testament hopes) to his final coming at the end of human history (with power, to judge us all). We are meant to think of Jesus’ first coming, to help us prepare spiritually for the second.

If you follow the readings in a missal (we are now in Year C, where almost all gospels are from St Luke), you may see what I mean. It is as if the Church were standing back from society’s “rush to Santa” approach at this time of year, and asking us to take a view of Jesus’ coming that spans the millennia - from the Old Testament promises, to the end of the world, when he will “come again in glory”. For me, the idea of stepping away from the Santa / toys / snow / supermarket-adverts sort of Advent seems a good thing, but the problem is that most of us may find it hard to be interested to Christ’s ‘final coming in glory’. It is beyond our imagination, and rarely mentioned in sermons, so I suspect it does not have much effect on our spiritual lives.

But there is another “coming” of Jesus, in between his arrival at Bethlehem 2,000 years ago and that at the end of the world: his spiritual presence with us now – in the Church and in our personal lives. I suggest that this is the sort of ‘coming’ of Jesus that does have an effect on us. This is very true of the RC Church’s sacraments, where the idea is that special human acts, combined with faith and the power given by Christ, allow us to “meet” him in meaningful ways. Think of someone burdened by a heavy conscience hearing the words of absolution in Confession, or a bereaved person sharing the comfort of a Funeral Service, or relatives round a deathbed seeing and hearing the emotive Anointing of the Sick (the “Last Rites”) being given to their loved one, and so on. But anyone of faith can be aware of Jesus’ presence in his/her spiritual life: prayer to God simply involves believing in his presence, and

wanting and loving him. Reciting or reading set prayers can help, but they are not essential. In the old Catechism, prayer was simply defined as “the raising-up of the mind & heart to God” – a perfect summary of what Jesus’ spiritual presence lets us do. In recent years, many religious websites have been developed, to include prayers & devotions that allow people to ‘raise their minds and hearts to God’. This is possible because of Jesus’ spiritual presence – unseen but true – in the Church, and thus, in us all.

So, how can we approach Advent? As a priest, I have never tried to tell people how they should ‘feel’, but here are two ideas which might be useful. The first is the children’s sense of make-believe. Advent is a fiction: we pretend that Jesus has not come, and share the Old Testament people’s drawn-out wait for the Messiah. The first readings are from the Prophets, looking forward to God’s intervention. Israel’s rather bloody and chaotic history meant that they yearned for peace and stability from their future Messiah. For instance, this weekend’s first reading says: *“I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, who shall execute justice in the land.”* The ‘branch’ meant the Messiah.

My second idea is the balance between watching and relaxing. We believe that the Messiah did come, and fulfilled the prophets’ hopes, so we can “relax” and enjoy the spiritual benefits he brought. But the gospel each first Sunday of Advent is still there and cannot be ignored. This Sunday, its 2nd paragraph starts: *“Watch yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation, and that day will come upon you suddenly, like a trap.”* I know that the words *“that day”* refer to the end of the world, but closer to home, the end of my (and your) ‘world’ is the moment of our death. I suggest that this means that nothing is permanent or totally fixed. One effect of the current state of the world – climate crisis and wars - should be to shake us out of complacency. I am typing this before we know the result of the Parliamentary vote about Assisted Dying. If passed, it could deeply affect how we treat the elderly & very sick - adding to the massive changes of social life in recent years. As Christians, we have to take these things into account, as we deal with the world around us.

Finally, let’s not be pessimistic. We can all too easily obsess about problems: world, government, church, diocese, local communities, etc. While needing to be aware of difficulties, we should also appreciate the blessings & resources we have – things undreamt-of just 30 years ago. At a human level, we can enjoy the run-in to Christmas (especially with young children) while not going daft about it. As always, balance is the answer! *Fr Jim Dunne.*