

First Sunday of Advent

"It will seem as though all hell has broken loose - sun, moon stars, earth, sea, all in an uproar, and everyone all over the world in a panic at what is coming...When these things start to happen, stand tall, for your deliverance is near at hand."

Luke 21, 28-28; 34-36



Getting towards the end of Luke's Gospel, the writer ventures into an imaginative and hypothetical description of Christ's Second Coming. Since he has no inside knowledge of what that will look like, he relies on the kind of language we associate with poetry - metaphor, symbolism and hyperbole. Because his topic is the end of the world as we know it, we call it apocalyptic writing. It is closer in style to poetry than to prose.

Poetry is destroyed when we undertake a word by word or line by line analysis of the text. We get a better appreciation by allowing the words to wash over us. In that way we get a feel for what the author is describing. In today's gospel-reading Luke offers a poetic description of how the world and, indeed, the universe will be disjoined at the time of the Second Coming of Jesus.

We are used to dealing with signs and symptoms which are pointers to various aspects of our daily living. A flashing red or blue light frequently points to a hazard ahead on a road or a police operation in progress. When we present ourselves to a doctor for examination, we describe the signs that something is amiss in our bodily functions. We can even begin to panic as we await the doctor's interpretation and assessment of those signs in the light of his or her professional experience. The signs of the end times that Luke names are frightening. Paradoxically, however, they are the signs of the arrival of the fullness of love in the person of Jesus, who knows fully the human condition and the ups and downs that are part of it. But, if we are going to be able to stand secure in the presence of the Son of Man when he returns, we must surely be alert to the signs of chaos, destruction, injustice and inequity present in our contemporary world, and take responsible, gospel action.

Today's gospel-reading parallels our recent Sunday readings from Mark. Following Mark, Luke's description of the upheaval and chaos in the natural world, comes immediately after the story of the widow's mite. In explaining the action of the widow giving her all, Jesus describes the inequality and disparity of a religious system which forces people like the widow into penury. He then moves the focus onto the Temple practices that cause the disparity and points out that, in time, the Temple and the system that supports it will be destroyed totally. The magnificent Temple edifice will prove to be as ephemeral as the new leaves, flowers and fruit on the fig tree.

The relevance of all this for us in the here and now is that the upheaval Jesus describes as a prelude to the coming of the Son of Man is really an invitation for us to look at our world and notice the signs of upheaval that leave us less than comfortable. The world of commerce is intent on lulling us into a sense of false security. The shopping malls are decorated already with tinsel and gaudy adverts for bargain-priced presents. And have carols echoing through all the shops, forcing us to think that Christmas has arrived already. Yet there are still vast gaps between the poor and the rich; the homeless seek shelter for the night on the doorsteps of the shopping malls; migrant families are locked away in detention centres because they lack the right documentation; the Covid pandemic is still causing havoc around the globe; refugees are pleading for welcome at the borders of wealthy countries, whose citizens are deaf to cries for assistance. We live in a world that is seriously disjoined and on a planet that has been desecrated because of human selfishness and neglect. Yet the retail industry tries to massage our senses and our minds into believing that our world is full of peace and good-will.

But over the next few weeks, Advent intervenes to shake us out of the lethargy that has numbed us into insensitivity. Hidden in the signs of disintegration, upheaval and chaos are signs of God's ever-present love. To see them, however, we have to make time to look, to discover and to ponder. This first Sunday of Advent is an invitation to us to stop and take in the many signs of God's love hidden in the ordinary upsets of our lives, in the babbling and disagreements of our political leaders, in the Covid pandemic that has blown away our notions of normality and distanced us from those we love.

Traditionally, we take the Advent season as a time of preparation for the coming of Jesus into our lives. If we are to allow Jesus to be born in our hearts, we can expect that he will nudge us to involve ourselves in changing what is crying out for change and conversion, not just in ourselves, but in our world. He is calling us to set to work to establish the kingdom of God where we live and work and socialise. That involves treating one another, especially those who are so often overlooked, with justice, respect, care and compassion. In a very real sense, Advent telescopes our lives into four weeks of searching, noticing, reflecting, and taking constructive Gospel action. And isn't that the purpose of our lives? Are we not on a life's journey to come into the presence of the one who loves us endlessly. His love is so boundless that the prospect of coming before him when our earthly lives come to an end must fill us with hope. For then our pretences and self-justification will evaporate, and we will rest secure with the one who loved us into life and who loves us in our strength and weakness, in our failures and our triumphs.