



Revd Ro's Reflection on Advent Sunday

Year A

Romans 13.11-14

Matthew 24.36-44

'The bells of waiting advent ring; the tortoise stove is lit again.'

Thus begins John Benjamin's well-loved poem. It doesn't seem possible that it is Advent Sunday already. All over the world this Advent Sunday people will be lighting the first candle on the Advent crown. The origin of the Advent crown is lost in the mists of time but by the Middle Ages Christians had adopted the practise and it became part of their spiritual preparation for Christmas. Advent crowns are also becoming popular in people's homes. I always love making the Advent crown for Spital. It is a beautiful tradition and illustrates Jesus' words, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.' (John 8.12) and of course John 1.5 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.'

The wreath or crown is circular and is symbolic. It has layers of meaning. A circle is endless, symbolising the eternity of the creator God. It also symbolises eternal life won for us by Jesus. The circular wreath can also be seen as representing the world which, with the candle at the centre, again illustrates the quotation 'I am the light of the world.' The wreath is made of evergreens they are a symbol of everlasting life.

The gospel reading for this morning has been interpreted in many ways. Few of us will forget the Andre Previn sketch with Morecambe and Wise. Eric is due to play Grieg's Piano Concerto while Andre Previn conducts. Obviously things do not go to plan and the result is hilarious. In the end the exasperated Previn, called by Eric Andrew Preview says, 'You are playing all the wrong notes!' Eric famously replies 'I am playing all the right notes, but not necessarily in the right order!'

Actually the interpretations of this gospel reading can come under that umbrella. People interpret this passage and the one which has gone before according to their own ideas putting the emphasis where they want. There is nothing wrong with that in essence but we have to be careful. We have to get the notes in the right order for this to make sense.

Of course if we look immediately before our passage,

³⁰ 'Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see "the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven" with power and great glory. ³¹ And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.'

We can jump to the conclusion that Jesus is referring only to his second coming, the Parousia. I think we have to put the passage in context. The passage is near the end of Matthew's gospel. Jesus is teaching in the Temple and he has already predicted its destruction.

^{24.1} 'As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. ² Then he asked them, 'You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

Naturally they want to know when the sign of this catastrophe will be,

¹⁵ 'So when you see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place, as was spoken of by the prophet Daniel (let the reader understand), ¹⁶ then those in Judea must flee to the mountains;' Jesus is referring to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. To a Jew this would be the end of everything, total devastation. Of course we know that as Jesus predicts this will happen 'within a generation' that is exactly true it happens in AD 70. The catastrophe could have been avoided. As Jesus says in Luke 13.34

'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!'

The Jews could have turned to him and to his message of peace and love for one another. Instead they choose rebellion and foolish nationalistic pride. The Romans, ruthless against any opposition, squash them like flies. The Temple is destroyed; it is the heart and soul of the nation. Firstly no one knows when this will be, secondly as with all war families will be devastated.

⁴⁰ 'Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.'

However, all this could have been avoided had they listened to Jesus' message and turned to him. Jesus came initially to the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' but they turned their backs on the true shepherd, preferring to wander away into the wilderness and follow false leaders.

We know that the leaders were oppressive and corrupt, out for their own power. The king was a Roman puppet, Temple worship was controlled by corrupt people, and it was no longer God's holy place. Jesus symbolises that when he throws out the money changers. He has cleansed the Temple. If only they knew it, here is God entering into the Temple. Sadly the people have Jesus crucified and turn away. Their destruction is upon them.

⁴² 'Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.'

But what of those who do turn to him? They need to get away from Jerusalem, avoid foolish nationalism and keep Jesus at the heart of everything they do. Then they will avoid the destruction to come, theirs is the task of taking his message to the world.

Now, looking back centuries later and seeing the destruction of Jerusalem as a historical event, not something we have to live through, we are going to add other interpretations. But Jesus' message does hold true, life is uncertain. We have only to look at what is happening in our world now to

know that. Think of the wars causing unnecessary suffering in the world. As ever they are the result of people's lust for power and inhumanity to one another. Jesus gives us the true way of life. So as we stand at the beginning of Advent when traditionally we look for the coming of our King Jesus in God's recreated order, we as Christians need to get our acts together. We need to examine our lives, our behaviour and do so honestly. The Parousia is fundamental to our belief. No one knows the date or the hour but Jesus will come in glory to judge the living and the dead. His message is clear, 'be ready'. He has told the parable about the rich fool. Well that is part of the reading too, none of us know how long we have left. We need to live as Jesus taught. Paul sums it up just prior to our passage from Romans 13.

⁸ 'Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.'

He reiterates the commandments which are summed up by Jesus' new commandment, the commandment given at his Last Supper before he went out and lived it. 'Love one another as I have loved you.' It is by this that we can prepare for our Lord. We must share his love and his message with others caring for them as he cares for us.

The letter to the Romans continues in our passage for today

¹¹ 'Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near.'

The central point is that God's recreated order is coming, not when it will occur precisely. It has already broken into the world with Jesus Christ, crucified and risen; God incarnate who walked with us. With Jesus everything was changed. It is the role of every Christian to live as citizens of the new world right now. Paul is writing to the Romans. These Christians are living in a pagan and immoral society. The values and behaviour that they were used to, that those around them still class as the norm, the followers of Christ must turn from. Those old ways are not acceptable any longer. It is all summed up in the word love. The love we have for Christ and one another.

'Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light;'

Armour is made to protect, Jesus is the light of the world. If we live in his way and walk in his light the ways of darkness are not acceptable. Night symbolises darkness and evil, in fact all the sorts of behaviour a Christian turns from.

¹³ 'Let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy.'

I dare say we can say we don't go in for many of the first ones but 'quarrelling and jealousy?' Well Paul is setting high standards, standards that the new Christians in Rome and every Christian must take as theirs. If you live according to Jesus' teaching, if love is at the centre then you don't want to hurt, to steal, to covet and so on. Indeed the armour of light, i.e. Jesus, protects us from those things by enabling love.

Love is a big word and in English it covers too much. But, the brotherly love, sisterly love, care for each other, the Love that we feel for God precludes evil. It is easy to say but the way of love is hard, it took Jesus to the cross.

¹⁴ 'Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.' When I was at college I had to arrange a service one Sunday to celebrate the various forms of human love. We worked hard on it and it was a success. Love is a gift from God, marriage is a sacrament. We all know how love can be distorted by selfish desires that succeed only in hurting others. That is what Paul is referring to. Let Jesus be the guide to your behaviour and there will be no room for wrong. If you do 'love one another' as Jesus did, you can't bully, hurt or wrong in any way. Forgiveness is central to Jesus' teaching. During his life and on the cross he lived it out. He asked forgiveness of God for those who were banging in the nails, he forgave the penitent thief. Jesus sets us the example.

We do not know when God's recreated order will be fulfilled. We don't know when Jesus will come again to judge the earth. We do know that it will happen, so says Jesus, so says Paul, be ready at all times. Act as children of light at all times and you will not be caught wanting. If the new order began with Jesus then we are already children of light so we have to live in Jesus' new way now, in fact help it into being by our behaviour. As I look back at these Reflections I realise how many times I quote Jesus's words, 'Love one another.' That is because it is central, so of course it is the central message of Paul too.

This is Paul's advice to Christians living in a pagan society with temptation all around. It is his advice to us. During Advent especially we look for the coming of Jesus as our King who will judge the earth and we thank God for his coming to earth at Bethlehem and walking alongside us; Emmanuel, God with us.

'O come O come Emmanuel.' John Mason Neale.

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