

Advent: A Season of Expectation

A Reflection from the Revd Herbert O Driscoll, from his book A Year of the Lord.

What a beginning to Advent... signs and distress, fear and foreboding! I chose to share this passage from O'Driscoll because I think he makes good sense out of a complicated apocalyptic passage of scripture.

Luke 21:25-28:

²⁵ 'There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶ People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'

O Driscoll writes: Advent is a season. That may seem very obvious, but I mention it for a particular reason. Each of the seasons (Advent, Epiphany, Lent or Easter) uses a rich collection of scriptures, taken from both testaments, the psalms, and sometimes the Apocrypha. Together they form a kind of orchestra playing a vast and complex symphony of faith, the theme of which is both simple enough for a child's hearing while being utterly profound and majestic in meaning. ...

Advent is a season of expectation. The word itself means that. We expect something to come. What is that something? It is the growing expectation of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. But what exactly do we mean by such language? Obviously we are not claiming that in a physical sense Mary again gives birth in some geographical twentieth-century Bethlehem.

Advent is a season when Christians prepare to recall something that happened long ago. But why go on recalling a memory? Because this particular memory is of something or someone who by entering past time changed the meaning of time and gave us a new way of thinking about the future. The memory on which Christian faith is founded (in this season the birth of Jesus Christ) creates for us the hope of a future time when what we saw come true in him (ultimate love and the capacity to conquer death) is what we will see come true for the whole creation. That is the mystery and the hope, the dream if you will, which the whole season of Advent expresses. Its scriptures, its psalms, its hymns, its homilies or sermons are all trying to express at least a fact of this hope.

In the gospel passage Jesus is speaking to the disciples. He uses the images of an apocalyptic time. He describes, in those timeless images, an age of change, turmoil, fear, anxiety, natural catastrophe, social and political upheaval. The images are just as effective a description of the age we live in. But when Jesus ends that terrible list, he says extraordinary things. He tells his disciples that, when such times come, they will see the Son of Man coming. They should then lift up their heads because their redemption is near.

Is it possible to understand our Lord telling us that in an age such as ours we will recover the realisation that there is a son and daughter relationship between us and God, and that this relationship is hidden in our humanity half-forgotten and neglected, until apocalyptic times and conditions bring it to birth in us again? In other words, through adversity God forces us to face the conditions which our sinful human behaviour has brought about. In response, if we so choose, we can discover a reborn humanity that gives us the grace to take courage and offer our gifts to God for the building of the next chapter of his plan, for which Christ came into time and history.