

Advent 1C 1/12/2024

We are living in a time of significant change. Whether it is the up and down of elections; the energy and tension embedded in politics in the public square, international conflicts and wars, debates on climate change, or shifts in the standards of costs of living there is a feeling of uncertainty in the air. It seems that things are out of control. Or, at least out of our control. Perhaps that is the point. We are not in control.

The first Sunday of Advent reminds us that we are not in control. It also provides direction and reassurance amid the chaos and confusion. This first Sunday of the church's calendar year invites us to suspend our linear notions of time. The season of Advent reminds us of *Kairos* time: deep time, the deep magic, perhaps that CS Lewis alludes to in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. A time that requires us to suspend the false control of *Chronos* time. It asks us to move away from dependence on false narratives. We are invited to make meaning of narratives that call on us to wait for God's realm.

The Gospel reinforces all of this when Jesus speaks with an apocalyptic voice. Jesus said, "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. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken."

It is tempting to try to parse out Jesus' words and make literal connections with our current time. Equally enticing is the desire to use Jesus' words to predict the future. This, however, is beyond the larger point of what God is communicating to us this Advent season.

The famous theologian and preacher Frederick Buechner provides a framework for thinking about Luke's words as we start Advent in his book *Secrets in the Dark*. He writes, *Does he mean there will be real eclipses and strange comets that have never been seen before, maybe a reordering of the constellations themselves to scrawl some fateful starlit message across the night sky? Or is he speaking symbolically of some upheaval not of the world without but of the world within – an upheaval of the hearts and minds and spirits of the human race?* He continues, *"I think we are waiting. That is what is at the heart of it. Even when we don't know that we are waiting, I think we are waiting. Even when we can't find words for what we are waiting for, I think we are waiting. (1)*

We are waiting during this season for the birth of baby Jesus. As Christians, we slow down from the busyness of an always-on culture and the distractions of ever-present mobile phones to prepare our hearts and minds for Jesus' birth.

Generally we do a very fine job of preparing for what we know, events that we expect at some future date that can be precisely determined. We make our plans and prepare for family events such as birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, and the like. We are also quite adept, despite the hectic pace, at preparing for major holidays such as Easter and Christmas. We make extensive plans for our next holiday or long weekend.

Imagine picking up the Sunday paper or going online and reading in giant letters, **Jesus Christ Will Return on December 25!** *Chronos* actually turned to *Kairos*. What would we do? How would we react to this astonishing information? I think there would be two basic reactions. Some of us, out of

fear, would change our lives immediately. The Lord is coming and we are not ready. We might start going to Church more often, probably every day. We might stop worrying about the log in our neighbour's eyes and the speck in our own.... Prayer would become a much higher priority in life. We would pray not only in the morning and evening, but many times each day. We would seek reconciliation, with a member of our family, neighbour, colleague, and certainly with God. I remember distinctly my New Testament tutor at St Stephen's House Fr Eric Franklin speaking to us on the matter of the second coming in the New Testament. I think I was aged 25: "well boys if Jesus came back tomorrow- that would spoil your plans..."

Others might have a very different response. Some of us might do nothing differently. Some in a defeatist attitude might say, "There is nothing I can do at this late hour. God has already decided my fate. I might as well continue what I have been doing all along." There are still others who might not change a thing they are doing, but not in a defeatist mode. Some of us hopefully would say, "Isn't this the event for which the world has been waiting? Isn't this the reason that I was born?" Possession of such an attitude would allow us to continue doing what we have always been doing, confident that our preparations have been sound.

While one must be vigilant and properly prepared, there should be nothing to fear. God is the judge, but as Christians, living in the light and hope of Christ's message of reconciliation, peace, and love, we can be confident that the Lord stands ready to welcome us. The question we must ask is: Have we faithfully led the life the Lord has given us? We must evaluate our lives, take the oft-times perilous inward journey of self-discovery, and ask the hard questions.

A famous and anonymous poem describes the challenge we face:

He was going to be all that he wanted to — Tomorrow
None would be kinder or braver than he — Tomorrow
A friend who was troubled and weary, he knew
Who'd be glad of a lift, and who needed it too,
On him he would call and see what he could do — Tomorrow
Each morning he stacked up the letters he'd write — Tomorrow
And the thought of the folks he would fill with delight— Tomorrow
But hadn't one minute to stop on his way,
"More time I will give to others," he'd say — Tomorrow
The greatest of disciples this man would have been — Tomorrow
The world would have hailed him if he had seen — Tomorrow
But, in fact, he passed on, and he faded from view,
And all that he left here when living was through,
Was a mountain of things he intended to do — Tomorrow!

We must not wait until something happens, such as a bout with ill health, an accident, or economic misfortune, to "make right" our relationship with God. We need to get going *now*! Jesus' warning in the gospel to be aware of the signs of the times challenges us to open our eyes and ears to our contemporary world. We would be blind to not realise that secularisation dominates our society; we cannot avoid this reality. We should reap the benefits of our first-world Australian society, but living in the world does not mean we must be of the world. We must be the sign of the times of which Jesus speaks. One of the more prominent signs of today's world preaches an anti-Christian message. We, the contemporary disciples of Jesus, must be, therefore, a sign of a different Christ-centred

message. We must be a sign for the vigilance that is needed and the preparedness we must undertake.

These must be the signs we give to the world, not the fear that paralyses and leads to inaction. We need **not** carry a sign that warns, “The End Is Near.” We can do much more and be more positive through the example we set. A popular Christian hymn from the 1970’s reflecting a view articulated by the Early Church Father Tertullian of Christians from the 2nd Century provides the goal, “They’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

Advent begins with our need to patiently and without fear or consternation wait for the coming of the Lord at the end of time. At this time of year the busy lives we lead only become more filled with things to do, people to see, and activities that fill our diaries. We become “stressed out” and worried about many things. Our busyness often keeps us from concentrating on things that are much more fundamental in our lives, most especially our relationship with God. We fear waiting for we do not like the unknown. However, today’s scripture readings tell us that we need to develop the ability to wait patiently for God, always remembering how patient God is with us.

Death, our ultimate meeting with God, is a fearful event for most because we have no control and are baffled by what will happen. Yet, if we have done what God asks of us, if we have made a good effort to fulfil our vocations to holiness and service, then there is nothing to fear. As our Advent journey begins, therefore, let us find the time to wait with joy and wonder. Let us take the time to wait for God, who created us, has loved us, and stands ready to greet us with his words of encouragement, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25:34b).

Fr Robert Newton

1) Frederick Buechner “Waiting” from *Secrets in the Dark* Harper Collins 2007