

Advent Sunday

St Mary's 2nd December 2018

School inspectors once visited Ampleforth, the famous Roman Catholic school and asked Basil Hume, then Abbott of the community, what was its purpose. "To prepare its pupils for death", he replied, to rather startled inspectors. If they had asked the same question to Christians in New Testament times, they would have received an even more startling answer. "To prepare for Christ's coming in glory" they would have replied.

The second coming, or the coming of Christ in Glory, though it is the major theme of Advent, is not something we think about very much as Anglicans. I don't think I have ever heard a sermon on the subject. We tend to leave it to the wilder shores of American evangelicalism. But there it was in this morning's Gospel and Sunday by Sunday we say in the creed "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.". We can't just ignore it. So, what are we to make of it?

First, we need to distinguish between literal truth and symbolic truth.

Jesus in today's Gospel says "You shall see the Son of Man coming in clouds of glory" imagery taken up in today's wonderful Advent hymn That could be literally true, and some believe it to be so. But it could also be symbolically true, vivid picture language to talk about what cannot in fact be pictured but which is nevertheless true. We should beware of saying "Its only a symbol". Symbols are important and in their own way convey reality. The Union Jack symbolises the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom is a reality. To make this clear I would want to maintain that much Christian language is symbolic realism. It is symbolic, but what it symbolises is real, not just a construct of our imaginations

If we take the belief in Christ's coming again in glory to be symbolic truth, what then are the truths that this conveys? I would suggest three.

First, God's good purpose will finally be vindicated in a way for all to see. The world which we know is marked by terrible injustice, cruelty, corruption and suffering. The Jews of old longed for the time when all this wretchedness would be overturned and sheer goodness, and all those who seek to do good would be seen to be triumphant, resplendent. God's glory would shine in and through all things. This is the hope of the Old Testament prophets as for example in Jeremiah whom we heard this morning in the first reading. As Christians we believe that the beginning of the end- this vindication of God's good purpose- came with Jesus, Jesus who died in solidarity with all those who lose out in the world as it is now, and who was raised into the eternity of his father. They saw this as a pledge and foretaste of what would happen universally. That would happen when Christ came again, not in hiddenness this time, but in Glory. So, the first truth belief in the second coming conveys is that God's justice and goodness will finally be triumphant and seen to be triumphant by all.

The second truth is that it is Christ himself, and his values, in the light in which everything else will be seen and judged. In the Sermon on the Mount he spelt out clearly those who will come out of this on the right side- the humble devout who put their trust in God, the meek, those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail, the pure in heart, those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.

The third truth conveyed is that God's purpose includes the whole of humanity and indeed the whole of creation. There is a very powerful passage in the eighth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans in which he writes about the whole of creation groaning and travailing in pain until that ultimate salvation comes about. The problem with Basil Hume's answer with which I began, is that it is very individualistic. That is fine as far as it goes. But according to the New Testament, a theme taken up in our hymns, every eye shall behold him and the earth itself shall be changed.

Scientists suggest various ways in which life on earth could come to an end. But the end or goal that the Christian faith belongs to another order altogether. There was a beginning, some 13.8 billion years ago when space, time, energy and matter came into being ex nihilo, out of nothing. There is a point in the future, totally unknown to us, when all will be changed into what we can only call the stuff of eternity. Paul has a most amazing visionary passage that you sometimes hear read at funeral services.

Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable...I tell you a mystery. We will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet” and so on to “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where O death is your victory?

Its picture language of course. But what it amounts to is that we have a most glorious hope, not just for ourselves but for the whole of God’s creation. What he set going with a good purpose he will bring to a consummate conclusion.

God is a God who reaches out to us, who takes the initiative, who comes to us. He came to us in the humility of the incarnation. He will come to us at the end with that humility revealed in all its glory, and he comes to us now, every now, in the duties and joys of every day, of every moment of every day. Let us wait upon him and look to see him in those duties and joys, and seeing him, serve him.

At this time of year of course we begin to be preoccupied with preparations for Christmas. We think about the immediate circle of our family, the wider one of our friends and the wider one still of the world as a whole in all its pain and anguish. Christ is the centre of all those circles and he comes to meet us there. Let us open our minds and hearts to serve him there that when he comes in glory, he may gather us to himself as his own.