

## DEVELOPING A KINGDOM PERSPECTIVE

When you consider the times we are living through, Advent Sunday has arrived at a particularly appropriate moment this year. The Church's Year begins with a call to clarify our priorities in the light of life's ultimate questions. Advent asks us to put first things first!

And we'll certainly need to get our priorities straight if we're going to respond appropriately to the challenges that face us at the moment. Ours is a world that seems to be getting continually smaller and more interconnected. Take Climate Change. There is no way we can deal with this as single nations; we'll need to learn to co-operate. It looks very much as though we are all being invited to move beyond appeals to national self-interest towards more enlightened policies of shared responsibility and joint action. Similarly, the continuing civil war in Syria and the recent assassination of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, don't just affect the countries of the Middle East, but involve us all, while the internet revolution reminds us how immediate, global and personal our communications have become. All the signs suggest that our increasingly interconnected world is challenging us to find new ways of relating to one another - politically, economically and socially.

Nearer home, the immediate future of our country is being forged in front of our very eyes as we speak. The implications of Brexit are going to take a generation or more to work out fully, as we struggle to refashion our relationship with Europe and the world generally. But even more pressing is our need to come together across the internal divisions that the Brexit debate has exposed. How can we learn to listen patiently and respectfully to one another, so that the various communities within our society can discover how to trust one another and come together for the common good? It's a big ask.

What makes it all the harder is that we are facing these challenges against a background of sustained financial austerity. We are all aware of the continuing pressures on our health, welfare and education services, on our police and our courts, and on local government. Those who are poorest and most vulnerable have to bear

the brunt of these cut-backs, but everyone is affected in one way or another. Much of the anger and frustration that is around at the moment is an expression of the sense of powerlessness that many people are experiencing in the face of the complexities and uncertainties of life. These are feelings that we can all recognize.

So here we are this Advent Sunday, coming together to celebrate the Eucharist, bringing all these anxieties and concerns with us. We come to church today, not just for ourselves, but on behalf of our society and the world as a whole. So let's ask: 'What is God's Word for us this Advent?! What is his Good News for us today?' 'How can the Advent Gospel guide us in our response to one another and to God?'

Well, for a start, let's remind ourselves that Advent is not about an absentee Christ who has come and gone again and may one day return. It's about the Christ who is present in his Spirit wherever his followers meet – the Christ encountered in people, in acts of love, in prayer, in the breaking of bread. The Advent gospel reminds us that our daily response to the poor, the homeless, the starving and the imprisoned is, in fact, our response to the Christ who is to be found, by those with eyes to see, in the poorest and most marginalized members of society.

But perhaps the most important gift that Advent can give us is a new sense of perspective, so that we can begin to reassess our priorities. Advent reminds us that just as there was a beginning of creation, so there will be an end; and just as there is a beginning to our lives, so each of us will die. For the Bible, 'the end' doesn't mean a final stop, like the end of a journey. It means the **purpose**, the end for which you and I and the whole universe were made, our proper and satisfying completion. Our purpose is to come to know God himself, responding to his love that Jesus reveals, and to one another with care and compassion, and so to find our completion, our fulfilment and our wholeness, as those who are made in God's likeness.

But if our ultimate joy is to find our fulfilment in the company of heaven, so the purpose of the whole world, the **end** of history, is the establishment of the Kingdom of God. This is what Jesus came to proclaim: God's Kingdom. He lived it, preached it, suffered for it, died for it. And his victory over death was the greatest witness to its reality. His life and death and resurrection demonstrate once and for all the victory of

good over evil. The Kingdom he reveals – life as God would have it – is the guarantee that war and disease and poverty are a violation of God’s will, and that in the end, however long it takes, good will triumph over evil, truth over the lie, freedom and justice over oppression, love over hate, light over darkness. That is our vision, our hope, the end for which we pray every time we say ‘thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.’ And that too, is what we live for – to carry forward God’s reign on earth. The challenges we are currently facing - Climate Change, Brexit, our internal divisions, coping with financial austerity – all need to be seen in the light of God’s loving purposes. As we grapple with the problems of our time, the perspective of God’s Kingdom enables us to go forward in a spirit of trust and confidence.

Advent proclaims this vision. It’s much more than simply a hope for personal security, a yearning for reassurance, or a quest for prosperity. In the face of all our feelings of powerlessness and anxiety, Advent proclaims the promise of the Kingdom of God – the Kingdom which is to be fulfilled in God’s good time and in ways we cannot yet imagine. But a Kingdom too which is already among us, a Kingdom of which every Eucharist is a tiny foretaste, and the Kingdom which – once our eyes are opened – keeps on breaking into our lives and the life of the world in the most surprising ways and the most unexpected places.

Advent encourages us to live with this vision before us so that we can place the problems of our time in a true perspective. In the light of God’s Kingdom which is even now being revealed, we begin to see what really matters. So we can live, freed from anxiety, in hope and confidence in God’s future, and committing ourselves to carry his Kingdom forward here on earth, as it is in heaven.

Let me end with this poem by R.S Thomas which expresses all this most beautifully. It’s entitled “The Kingdom” -

It’s a long way off, but inside it  
There are quite different things going on.  
Festivals at which the poor man  
is king, and the consumptive is

healed; mirrors in which the blind look  
at themselves and love looks at them  
back; and industry is for mending  
the bent bones and the minds fractured  
by life. It's a long way off, but to get  
there takes no time and admission  
is free, if you will purge yourself  
of desire, and present yourself with  
your need only, and the simple offering  
of your faith, green as a leaf.