

'After all the false dawns' – A Homily for Advent I

Jeremiah 33.14-16

1 Thessalonians 3.9-end

Luke 21.25-36

After all the false dawns.

who is this who unerringly paints

the first rays in their true colours?

So asks Richard Bauckham in his poem 'First Light,' a reading from tonight's Advent Carol Service. Advent is often spoken of as a season of waiting. It forms us as human beings, as those so often found existing between suffering and hope. Indeed we spend much of our lives waiting: waiting to hear news of a baby's birth, waiting for family members to arrive, for news of a new job, waiting for a pandemic to end, waiting in the darkness of suffering and doubt, waiting for that proposal for marriage, waiting in expectation and hope, but also in darkness and frustration.

Waiting is, perhaps, one of the most difficult things we have to do as human beings. Waiting means that we are not in control of a situation, waiting means handing over power and purpose to something or someone else, waiting means becoming vulnerable in a sometimes uncaring or unfeeling world, waiting means opening oneself up to new possibilities and new realities. This means that waiting can be daunting, painful, intense, profound. It also means that real waiting is not an idle marking of time, a procrastinating moment as someone else fixes things for us, or a passive sitting-by as something unfolds without us or even despite of us. Indeed, waiting can take the most effort as we strain ourselves into a future which is as yet unknown. This unknown future demands a great deal from us: courage, imagination, patience, hope.

Our gospel reading this morning reminds us that the early Church knew that Christian discipleship is all about waiting. 'Be alert at all times,' says Luke, 'praying that you

might have the strength... to stand before the Son of Man.' This alert watchfulness seems to share notes of joy but also of judgement. The Lord's coming is likened to an unexpected trap in today's gospel, so that we must constantly be on guard. But also like trees in spring, gently blossoming into the promise of summer. Once again, Advent waiting begins to take the shape of death and resurrection.

For us Christian's Advent waiting takes on a double edge: waiting for the fulness of God to be born again in the naked vulnerability of a tiny child, but also waiting for the One who is Pantocrator, the One who holds all things together, the One who comes to us both as searing judge and passionate redeemer. This means that Christ's coming is sometimes small and often unnoticed, but that it might also break into our lives in moments of profound hope, or paralysing desolation. Or as Cyril of Jerusalem in one of our Advent Carol readings this evening puts it, 'in his first coming he was wrapped in swaddling clothes in the manger. In his second coming he is clothed with light as with a garment. In his first coming he bore the cross, he will come a second time in glory accompanied by his angels.' Christ comes to us both in suffering and in majesty, in weakness and in fiery glory, and his coming brings both comfort and confrontation.

Advent is a season of darkness, as autumn gives way to winter, as bitingly cold winds begin to hit, as dark evenings move in, and as Christmas lights go up almost in protest against the barren, cold nights. But even in the cold darkness, hope silently waits:

Timid creatures creep out of burrows
sensing kindness
and the old crow on the cattle-shed roof
folds his wings and dreams.

Into all our wintry nights, the promise of the Son of God comes, the promise of a God who meets us in our broken vulnerability, a God who embraces us in the nakedness of love.

As we light the Advent wreath we are proclaiming that Advent waiting is so much more than merely enduring the darkness that is all around us. It is also about the kindling

of hope, that we are not lost in a world that is drifting aimlessly through the dark, but that Christ's coming brings meaning, blessing, light and love right into the middle of it all. Christian hope, Christian waiting, isn't just about endings, but is also about new beginnings. God's coming might indeed bring with it the pain of judgement, but it is also seen in the joyful cries of a newborn child. Death, so painfully real and so seemingly final, is somehow swallowed up in resurrection life.

This makes me think that God's coming is more than a holding of us in our broken vulnerability – although it is certainly that – that just perhaps it is also a resurrection-jolt into something new, something promising, something just around the corner, pressing us to new experiences, pushing us beyond our wildest imaginations. Judgement and hope, death and resurrection life, the journey of Advent itself. AMEN.