

‘The Advent of our God’ – A Homily for Advent I

*Behold, the great Creator makes
Himself a house of clay,
a robe of virgin flesh he take
which He will wear for aye.*

*Hark, hark, the wise eternal Word
Like a weak infant cries!
In form of servant is the Lord,
and God in cradle lies.*

Thomas Pestel’s great Christmas hymn is replete with paradoxical tensions and apparent contradictions: here eternity is revealed in time, power in weakness, wisdom in folly, spirit in flesh, reason in a child’s cries, homecoming in exile and life in death.

The Season of Advent into which we are plunged today proclaims the coming of God into our world and it also plays with contrasting and creative themes: judgement and hope, endings and beginnings, doom and deliverance.

Today I would like to explore these Advent themes through three lenses that our magnificent church building provides us with: the first is the great west window in which the creation story and the Nativity are pictured side by side; the second is the great east window in which we view two contrasting images of Christ; and the third is taken from our Advent icons of Christ Pantocrator in which a dual aspect of Christ is seen.

The first, our great east window, provocatively places two decisive movements of God in creating and shaping our world. The first throws us back into those early pages of Genesis and the creation of all things as God speaks the worlds into being. This is God as artist and potter, bringing all things into being out of creative delight and into beauty, order and blessing. This could never be a world given up to chaos, disorder, violence or death, but a cosmos in which we are called to make a home, a world in which blessing is spoken and heard, a world designed for love. In the second picture, the Creator of the world makes for himself ‘a house of clay.’ Not content to be distant and aloof, this God breaks into our world, making himself known in the yearning cries of a naked child, in the utter

vulnerability of human flesh. Such images remind us that this world is not alien to God's design, but that he creates each of us and everything for an intimacy with the divine, for the enjoyment of goodness, beauty and truth.

Our second picture looms large over the east end reredos of our Church's east end, a double image of Christ. The first represents Christ as the Suffering Servant, the one who plunges himself into our experience of isolation and exile, failure and guilt and then transforms it from the inside out. This is the God who travels deep into the darkness that we all at times feel, the pain of grief and loss, the vulnerability of illness, of hearts broken by sadness, betrayal and pain. In times of suffering we sometimes feel utterly alone, but we find that Jesus meets us there a sign of eternal suffering love. But a Suffering God is not enough, as we see so many suffer in our world, seemingly without hope and without aid. But the second image, this time of the Risen, triumphant Christ, enables us to see that suffering can never be the final word in our world, even as it threatens to overwhelm us and make life meaningless. But love rather than suffering is the final word: a love that transforms and redeems, heals and restores, a love that triumphs over all.

The third images can be found on our Advent icon boards. Here we see another double image of Christ. One half of the icon displays a stern and forbidding Christ, his eye stormy and dark, his hand resting on the book of judgement, a sign of contradiction against the injustices and failures of this world. But the other half displays something different, here Jesus' eye is gentle and his hand is held aloft in blessing. This is an icon of both doom and deliverance, reminding us that the coming of God into our world will be a judgement on our human failures to live in compassion and love one to one another and to our world, but that even this judgement itself will finally give way to blessing and peace.

Our world cries out for the Advent of our God, in which the heavens are rent asunder and Christ descends in order to remake all things. But God's coming into our world cannot be like a display of human power, but rather can only be seen in terms of weakness, gentleness and humility, an emptying out of everything we think power is about.

And what might this coming of God look like here in this place and among this gathered community? Perhaps it can be seen in the fragile, yet creative community

partnerships created here, in chance encounters of disturbance and grace with our refugee friends? Perhaps it can be seen in cream-teas served and stories told by the elderly and the isolated? Perhaps it can be seen in the singing lessons given to children as their confidence and voices begin to soar? Perhaps it can be seen in the playful cries of toddlers as they gleefully explore with reckless abandon every nook and cranny of our church spaces. Perhaps it can even be seen as we begin to listen to Queer voices coming from the margins to challenge and to bless us?

And most clearly the Advent of our God is seen as we break bread together, Sunday by Sunday, as young and old, rich and poor, vulnerable and powerful, guilty and forgiven, we find ourselves to be Christ's presence in our world, taken, blessed, broken and given out in humility and in love. AMEN.