

Advent Judgment

Sermon preached by Anthony Freeman at Holy Cross, Crediton, 27.11.11

In four weeks' time, on Christmas Day, we shall look back happily at the first coming of the Son of God who is also the son of Mary, born in a stable and laid in a manger. But today, on Advent Sunday, a day of penitence, our prayers and lessons make less comfortable reading, as they bid us look forward to the day when he shall come again to be our judge.

When that day will be, nobody knows ("neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father"¹); we are just told that it will come "as a thief in the night"² when we least expect it. The New Testament makes it clear again and again that Christians should not concern themselves with "the times and seasons that the Father has put in his own power",³ but instead should concentrate on being alert at all times and constantly about their Lord's business.

And just as we ought not to worry about the time, so neither should we bother about the nature of his coming. Perhaps it will indeed be a public display "coming on the clouds of heaven"⁴ and "with all his holy angels",⁵ as some of the more colourful biblical passages would have us believe. Or perhaps — more deeply biblical, or so it seems to me — we shall, like the prophet Elijah, each encounter the divine judge in the still small voice speaking individually in our own hearts: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"⁶ ... Anthony? ... John? ... Mary? ... You supply your own name — literally.

But whenever and however the judgment will come, the unequivocal message of the New Testament is that come it will. So the question for us becomes: is this day of judgment that Advent forces on our attention something we should fear, or something we should eagerly look forward to? The first Christians had no doubt. *Marana tha — Come, Lord!* — is the earliest recorded Christian prayer. The same Lord Jesus, who had died on the cross to save them, would now come in glory and make that salvation a reality. It would be a bad day for some — a bad day for the Romans, a bad day for the wealthy, a bad day in fact for all who would not acknowledge Jesus as Lord — but a good day for all who believed in him, a good day for the poor, the outcasts, and all who suffered injustice in this world.

So I come back to the question: is this day of judgment — bad for some, good for others — a day that we here today should welcome or fear? How ever lustily we sing "O come quickly, come, Lord, come!", can we honestly share the enthusiasm of the New Testament church for this day of universal justice? Speaking for myself, the answer has to be "No". Here's why. If the Lord is to come into the world with his justice and his peace, that means losing all those benefits we enjoy precisely because of injustice and war.

These thoughts strike me with particular force this Advent for two reasons. One is the ongoing anti-capitalist protest and the ambiguous response of the Church towards it. The other is more personal, but directly related to the first. Earlier this month I celebrated a "significant" birthday. As a result — if all goes to plan — I shall this coming Wednesday receive the first of the regular monthly payments from the Church of England Pensions Board to which I shall be entitled for the rest of my life. However, the Church can only afford these

¹ Mark 13.32

² I Thessalonians 5.2

³ Acts 1.7

⁴ Mark 14.62

⁵ Matthew 25.31

⁶ I Kings 19.13

payments because of its inherited wealth, now invested by the Church Commissioners in the very capitalist system against which the “Occupy” movement is protesting.

It is clear to me that, even with the “ethical” investment policies of the Church, my pension must in part depend upon injustices that underlie much of the world’s financial structure. So to pray for judgment and justice to come, is to pray for my Church pension to disappear — or at least to be reduced. This illustrates why in Advent we look forward both in hope and in fear to God’s just reign.

And what about the promise of peace? Surely that does not hold any nasty hidden downside? But it does. As well as my Church pension I am also now in receipt of a State pension, and that is even more tainted, because Her Majesty’s Treasury does not even pretend to have an ethical policy when it comes to tax revenues. I cannot quote a figure, but the ability of the Department for Work and Pensions to pay me — and many more of us here in church — our pensions and other welfare benefits, rests in large part upon the lucrative and successful British arms trade. So to pray for universal peace is also to pray for a drop in my — in our — income. And of course the income derived by the Treasury from the financial sector is even higher than that from the sale of weapons; the State’s income no less than the Church’s would suffer if God’s rule of universal justice came about. So I ask again, do we really want the Lord to come quickly?

I discuss these matters, not to make a political point but a religious one, and one especially fitted to this penitential season of Advent and its theme of divine judgment. Our attitude to God’s kingdom of peace and justice is bound to be ambiguous because our lives are ambiguous. There are no simple rights and wrongs; our human view of things — both as individuals and as nations — is partial: partial in the sense of never seeing the entire picture, and partial also in the sense of being viewed with a concern for our own well-being. That is why the Bible insists in many places that judgment should be left to God, because human judgment will always be partial, provisional, prone to error.

It is this inability to see things straight, to see things whole, that lies at the heart of human sinfulness. Sin is not for the most part willful wrong-doing; it is a state of simply not knowing what to do for the best. That is why, on almost any matter of importance, where decisions need to be made, people of goodwill, people of a shared faith, people with the same underlying moral principles, will find themselves ranged on opposing sides of the argument. To accept this ambiguous state of affairs is to accept that we are all sinful; and to ask God’s forgiveness of our sins — to be penitent — is to accept that there is actually nothing that we ourselves can do about it.

So, to return to the question with which we began — do we welcome the judgment or fear it? — the answer is that we do both. This is the ambiguity that characterizes the state of penitence. And the purpose of this penitential season of Advent is that, by our greater attention to prayer and the disciplines of the godly life, the ambiguity should begin to resolve itself. In other words, the outcome of our observance of Advent should be that, come Christmas, when we celebrate again his coming into the world, we shall desire Jesus more and fear his judgment less.