

## A Reflection from the Revd Ali Massey for the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent

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Advent means the coming or arrival of something important. In the liturgical context we use advent to mean the anticipation of celebrating the birth of the Christ Child at Christmas. But Advent is also a time when we also look forward to Jesus' return in glory at the end of time.

As Christians we live in this constant paradoxical state of the now and the not yet. Advent brings that paradox into sharp focus for us. In the weeks leading up to Advent our daily Bible readings have included the apocalyptic literature of the books of Daniel and of Revelation. Both of these books contain fantastical imagery and prophecies concerning the end times. This morning's Gospel reading is sometimes called 'the little apocalypse' because of its similarities to the book of Revelation.

Apocalyptic literature is sometimes written as a response to troubled times. The book of Daniel was written around 165 B.C. when the temple in Jerusalem was defiled and pagan religious practices were being imposed on the people of God. The book of Revelation (circa 95 A.D) was written during a time of prosecution of Christians, who refused to worship the Roman emperor.

The strangeness of this type of biblical literature should be tempered by the knowledge that the word apocalypse means unveiling or revelation. The fantastical imagery proclaims a message of hope, hidden in that imagery from hostile authorities. 'Insiders' will be able to read between the lines of the coded language to receive the message of hope and revelation. The dramatic visions contain colours, numbers and animals that need to be interpreted in the knowledge and love of God.

Apocalyptic literature reminds us that time can be thought of as linear, inextricably moving us towards the end of time and of God's final judgement. The time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth. When the troubles of today will be replaced by the glory of God. It holds out hope, that even if the faithful are suffering now, there will be a time in the future when that suffering will end with Jesus' glorious return.

Chapter 13 of Mark's Gospel, the little apocalypse, begins with one of Jesus' disciples commenting on the grandeur of the temple. Jesus responds by predicting the destruction of the temple. The temple had been the centre of the worshipping life of the people of God. But Jesus explains that the new centre of worship will not be a building, but will be the Son of Man.

The disciples want to know times and dates. They want certainties and details. Jesus responds by telling them about the signs and wonders that will herald the end times. He warns them of false prophets, wars, earthquakes, famines and persecution. The birth pangs that herald the creation of the new heaven and the new earth.

Then Jesus deals with the timing. He tells his disciples that only God the Father knows when the end time will be. But they, and us, should keep alert and pray. Watching and waiting for his second coming, his return in glory.

The good news is that we haven't been left without resources while we wait. This isn't a time of passive waiting, but an active time preparing ourselves for what comes next.

When people are forced to spend time apart, they sometimes leave messages or gifts for their loved ones to ease the distance. In the early days of our marriage, my husband Pete, spent some time in Africa and we weren't able to communicate for whole of the month he was going to be away. It was a different time then - no mobile phones or skype to keep in touch. So to keep a little bit of contact, I packed in his rucksack, four little gifts with a short message for him to open each week. A tiny reminder of home.

After Jesus left to return to his heavenly Father, he left us with many gifts. Those earliest Christians, the ones who had walked and talked with him in Galilee and Jerusalem had the gift of their memories. Many had witnessed his miracles and heard his teaching. They had heard his promise to return. But they, like us were waiting expectantly. Jesus' gifts are to encourage, resource and sustain us as we wait for his return in glory.

So what are those gifts? Jesus left us his peace. Jesus, through his life, death and resurrection bridges any distance between us and God. We can have peace with God and with one another while we wait.

Paul reminded us of other gifts in our first reading. Paul writes that we have all been given the spiritual gifts that we need to actively wait for Jesus' return. Everything we need to do our part in helping to bring about the kingdom of God here on earth.

Another gift is the gift of God's grace through Jesus. God has poured God's favour and love upon us, undeservedly and unreservedly. We can live in love and peace with each other because of God loved us first. Loved us so much that God sent God's Son to be our Saviour, our Redeemer and our friend.

Jesus promised us the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we are never alone. During his life on earth Jesus didn't travel far geographically, but through the gift of the Holy Spirit, God is with us all wherever we are in the world and at all times.

Jesus gave us the gift of the Gospel. The truth to speak out about God and to share in Jesus' ministry of love and reconciliation. Through the Holy Spirit we have the gift of the right words to use, even when we feel we have no words to share. The gift of the Holy Spirit uses our 'poor' words to share God's inestimable love and truth.

Through the example of his life and ministry, Jesus gives us the gift of a template of how to live our lives. How we can actively wait for his return by loving God and loving our neighbours.

And Jesus gives us the amazing gift of being changed by coming into his presence. By accepting the truth of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, Jesus offers each of us life - life in all its fullness.

Not a life lived in worldly terms, but in the knowledge and love of God. Living our best lives, lives that lead to eternal life through God's Son, Jesus Christ.

And we are not alone in our love for Jesus. We are given the gift of fellowship. The gift of living our lives in community with God and each other through Jesus Christ.

So as we live in this time of paradox. This liminal space between the now and the yet to come. Perhaps this Advent time we can allow ourselves to come closer to the mystery of the now and the not yet. To use the gifts that Jesus has given us to celebrate Jesus' peace, grace and presence. To wait actively and with renewed anticipation and joy as we look for the yet to come. The apocalypse, the unveiling, the revelation, the light of the world, Jesus Christ is coming. Let us look forward in joyful anticipation.

Amen