

SUNDAY MORNING AT ILKLEY: INTO ADVENT

Yesterday we used the Washing of the Disciples' Feet at the Last Supper as a key to the understanding of the death of Jesus. Today we want to look ahead into the new year which Advent will open to us, and to find the way to enter the future in the footsteps of Christ the King as we have glimpsed him.

Advent - past or future?

We've probably thought of Advent as a way of preparing for Christmas; and Christmas is the most traditional of times, when we sing old songs, and remember old friends, and feel old feelings, and lurch homeward....nothing could be further than all that from the real spirit of Advent, which means not "return to the past" but "oncoming future"!

The Advent season always begins with the theme of the Second Coming of Christ; this is the moment when the true kingship of Christ will be inaugurated in the world, and the Kingdom of God will be revealed in some kind of earthly terms. Rightly this is called "the End of the World" if the world is considered in opposition to God.

God is opposed wherever localized or individual human interests are enshrined as the ultimate purpose of the world. Wherever a human life is struggling to solve its own problems alone, in the teeth of fear and with no experience of that all-embracing relationship which bonds the creature to the Creator, life is being lived that is deprived - of its light, direction and meaning. Such situations create a space in the cosmos that excludes God, and which licenses all kinds of exploitation and destruction. Advent is the time when we can begin to create a mind where the Christian faith - treated as marginal, visionary, and sidelined - becomes the central truth about the real world, and the deeds of darkness which are generated in disregard of God, appear as the deeds of a world that is doomed. Thus the wholesale emphasis of Advent on the Last Things and the End of Time. We are looking for the coming of the kingdom, and until it comes we and our faith are in a mode of potentiality, whose historical closeness to the mind of Israel in the Old Testament is immensely revealing.

The Mind of Israel - the Age of Prophecy

The prophets were immensely charismatic figures who called for a personal response from their hearers. They were filled with a powerful sense of the future, firstly as a punishing visitation of truth un-lived, facts ignored, responsibilities shelved. To believe that failure in the past will have future consequence actually redeems the past. If the senselessness of the past stays floating in the substance of our life like a pointless incubus, it remains unresolved and unredeemed. *If there is a judgment on it*, it may resolve the senselessness and give the occasion for a new beginning. The prophets announced such a judgment, and detailed penalties that would follow. There is a distinct whiff of burning in the wake of a real prophet; his message demands a surgery: the acceptance of diagnosis, and a submission to treatment.

This may reveal why the prophets often plead with God to give judgment, to pass sentence on all that is evil; at their best they accept that this may mean that the blast of condemnation may not leave them unscathed themselves. Still, that God is our judge remains a cause for gratitude; we would rather be judged by the truth than by a vested interest.

The prophetic sense of the future is never far from the mystery of hope. The future as something joyous, fulfilled, and holy is perennial; the prophet calls on his hearers to rejoice because they are at this moment on the threshold of a new dawn.

At This Moment - *Hodie!*

I want to take up that phrase, “*at this moment*” because it is the heart of the matter. We cannot rejoice in the things of the past, because the past is absent from us; nor can we rejoice in the things of the future, because they are not here yet. All our understanding - of God and of our own nature - is pointing us to one *locus* - the present moment. This is where we are alive, and the quality of our lives is determined only here. Living in the past will not bring us any aggregation of happiness; the relegation of hope to the future does nothing to the reality we are living now. If we are to have any sense of salvation, it must come to us *now*.

My point is that the Liturgy does precisely this. This is why the alternative theologies of the Sacraments and of the liturgy are so wrong and fall so short. In the Mass we are not indulging in an act of nostalgia about the Last Supper; we are at it, we are sharing it, it is really present to us. There is no deed we can do that is more real, more vital, than this one, which opens up the time between 11 30 and 1 on November 22nd 1998 to *the whole* of the eternal truth of what happened in Jerusalem in the days before the Passover c. 33 AD. The doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the sacrament is thus vitally important.

Nor do we think that the value of what we do in the liturgy today will depend on how we feel, what we get out of it, or even what we put into it. That is why our doctrine of Christ as the real priest at every Eucharist is so vital; not what the priest says, or how the people join in, or how good the sermon or the music are, but the fact that Christ is present in his Church, and that they do the deeds he commanded, is enough: *the whole* Christian mystery is verified, and our inadequacies cannot prevent the truth of that.