

Homily for the Second Sunday of Advent (Year B)

5 December 2020 (Vigil Mass)
Chapelle de l'Hôtel-Dieu, Lyon

About two hundred years ago, there was a parson (an English country priest) who preached a terrifying sermon about the Apocalypse, saying it was imminent. His speech was all hellfire and brimstone, and his parishioners went home in a panic. The next day they were very relieved to see the parson in his garden, planting a tree. If he was doing that, they reasoned, he couldn't really believe the world was going to end any time soon!

Were they relieved, then, that they had more time to repent? Or more time to sin! You know the prayer of St Augustine: 'Lord, make me chaste, but not yet...'

Or simply, they were happy that life can go on a bit longer, without too much interference. We're quite happy as we are, thank you very much. Just leave us alone in peace for a little while. Don't invoke on us what is claimed to be a 'Chinese curse': 'May you live in interesting times!'

In the light of today's readings, however, I wonder if the parson's fellow villagers shouldn't rather have been disappointed, not relieved. At first glance, you might think the opposite. The second reading, from St Peter, has some scary stuff: 'The Day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then with a roar the sky will vanish, the elements will catch fire and fall apart, the earth and all that it contains will be burnt up.' This kind of apocalyptic language is actually very present throughout the NT, and Our Lord himself says similar things in the gospel.

But now pay attention to what follows: 'Since everything is coming to an end like this, you should be living holy and saintly lives while *you wait and long* for the Day of God to come' – we should greatly desire and look forward to this final Day of the Lord! And that's notwithstanding the fact that it will come with those terrifying cosmic images, as St Peter immediately repeats: 'when the sky will dissolve in flames and the elements melt in the heat.' So we should wait eagerly for the Apocalypse, longing for Jesus to return.

Like the English parson's congregation, we don't normally think or act this way. We want to live long on earth, and we consider (at least subconsciously) that if the Second Coming happens in my lifetime, it would be a jolly inconvenient thing. If Jesus comes tomorrow, I'm not ready for him!

To use an example, perhaps we're like Manchester United supporters in the era of Sir Alex Ferguson. Have you heard of 'Fergie time'? It's a famous accusation against the great manager of Man U, that whenever his formidable team was losing, referees would give him extra minutes in injury time, which often led to his team equalising or even a winning a match in the dying moments. So, we are like the Man U fans in the last minutes of the game, desperate for the time to be extended, so that we might snatch a last-minute victory out of the jaws of defeat.

At this point, I think we need to clarify some points. First, the Apocalypse should not be thought of as the destruction of the world, like in the film *Apocalypse Now* (in which an enormous asteroid threatens to smash the Earth to smithereens). That's the reduced, modern meaning of 'apocalypse'. In the Bible, however, Apocalypse literally means an unveiling. If you translate the Greek word *apocalypsis* into Latin, you get *revelatio* (revelation or unveiling). So, the Second Coming of Christ is a revelation or unveiling. Thus, any images of cosmic meltdown are secondary to the fact that God will be revealed in glory and majesty.

Second, notice that Isaiah in the first reading has a much gentler picture than St Peter: he talks of consolation (the famous "Comfort ye" passage in Handel's *Messiah*); he talks of an end to slavery and punishment; he talks of God 'like a shepherd feeding his flock, gathering lambs in his arms, holding them against his breast'. Similarly, we read in today's Psalm (also from the Old Testament): 'Mercy and faithfulness have met; justice and peace have embraced [kissed].' This should put us on guard against the very common mistake of saying the Old Testament is full of violence and wrath while the New Testament

is full of peace and mercy. But comparing our readings today might suggest the opposite! This mistake has a name – the heresy of 'Marcionism' – and unfortunately even today it leads some people to reject the Old Testament. In fact, there is plenty of both messages in both testaments. What we need to do is take all those images (both the uncomfortable and the comforting) and see them in the light of Christ, to whom they point.

With all these images, the real question is: what reaction do they provoke in me, and why is that? What is it about my life, my outlook, my faith, that pushes me to respond this way? To respond with fear to messages of judgment, and with relief to the offer of consolation? It's not only we who read the Scriptures: more deeply, it's the Scriptures reading us, exposing to the light what is in our hearts.

In today's Gospel we heard the punchy beginning of Mark: 'The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' Good news! The gospel literally means 'good news'. St John the Baptist comes to fulfil Isaiah's prophecy and announce the coming of Christ, the Son of God. 'Prepare a way for the Lord', make his paths straight.' This preparation is joyful, full of eager anticipation, but it will lead the people to confess their sins, so that they can be baptised into a new life.

In a way, John the Baptist summarises all the messages of the Old Testament. He is the hinge between the old and the new, the one privileged to announce the imminent coming of the Christ. And so, in his preaching, we can also find both the elements of threat and consolation. He says the Lord is coming with his winnowing fan; the axe is laid to the root of the tree which does not bear good fruit – this is a sharp wake-up call. But even these images can be received positively, as an encouragement. Perhaps the winnowing fan is less an instrument of terror, that would separate miserable me (the chaff) from more holy people (the wheat), and more to do with what wheat and chaff Christ will sift out *in my own life*, like a surgical tool healing what is wounded and sickly, and strengthening what is good and sound.

That's why the message of John the Baptist is ultimately a consolation: one more powerful than he is coming, who will baptise us with the Holy Spirit. In that baptism we will find the forgiveness of our sins, and moreover we will be a whole new creation in Christ.

I must add a final word about Our Lady, since this Tuesday we will be celebrating her Immaculate Conception: a great feast day in particular for Lyon. The Virgin Mary is the perfect example of one who waited eagerly for the Lord to come into her life. The angel Gabriel found her ready to receive him, ready to say YES to becoming the Mother of the Saviour.

You know the traditional pictures of the Annunciation: Mary is reading a book, the Scriptures, aware of the prophecies and eagerly awaiting her Saviour. Her heart was on fire with love of God. When the Holy Spirit overshadowed her to conceive the Christ child, that same Spirit was already present in her heart – having filled her with grace, indeed from the first moment of her Immaculate Conception in the womb of her mother Anne. St Augustine explains that Our Lady conceived Christ in her heart before she conceived him in her womb.

So that's the message for us today: if we let Christ dwell in our hearts today, when he comes again in glory we will not be surprised, let alone distressed, at the world disappearing before our eyes: we will be overjoyed to see him face to face, as he comes to heal and restore the whole creation to the glory of God.

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