

“Stand upright and hold your heads high”! (Lk. 21:28).

I play the piano for a choir down in Devonport. Every time we meet our choir leader says “Stand upright and hold your heads high”! Every week the choir members are told that their voices are not in their throats, not in their chests, but even lower, in their stomachs. They should stand upright, feet firmly on the ground, push out their ribs, take a deep breath, and sing.

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. If we had been living 500 years ago (in the time of Henry VIII), it would still be Advent Sunday (or thereabouts), but it would have played a different part in our lives. We would have made our Christmas puds on Stir Up Sunday, gone on a restricted diet for 5 weeks, until Christmas Eve, and then put up the decorations. Then for 12 indulgent days, celebration would have been allowed. The nonsense carol, the 12 Days of Christmas, is very old and is a good witness to earlier times.

There was a spiritual point to all this. You would be hungry on Christmas Eve! You would be impatient for Christmas to come (like children today waiting for Santa Claus). This was a physical but also a *godly* impatience. Waiting for Christ’s coming at Christmas was the Church’s way of teaching us patience, and deepening our excitement when the season came. Our patience for the first coming of Christ would also teach us, it was hoped, patience in looking forward to his Second Coming at the end of time.

And that brings us to today’s very difficult readings. Jeremiah, six centuries before Christ, says, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts: In this place that is waste, without human beings or animals, and in all its towns there shall again be pasture for shepherds resting their flocks.’ The Jewish people were once refugees in Babylon. Jeremiah went with them. The ruins of Babylon lie in modern-day Iraq, 59 miles southwest of Baghdad. When the Jewish people were allowed to return to their land, they found large parts of it so devastated, it could not even support grazing animals. But Jeremiah tells them there will again be pasture for shepherds to tend their flocks. So in the midst of bitter despair, a true word of hope is spoken.

I had to ask myself ‘what do I really think about today’s gospel reading?’ When we read “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars”, are we supposed to think of solar eclipses, orange moons, exploding supernovae? When we read “on the earth [there will be] distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves”, we are bound to think of rising sea levels, of disappearing islands and low lands, of tsunamis, of accelerating climate change. When we read “People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world”, we resonate with that, don’t we?

Are we right to find what Jesus says here about global disaster fulfilled in our times? My answer is ‘No’ and ‘Yes’. I think most of what Jesus prophesied in Luke’s Gospel has happened

already. He says 'When you see Jerusalem encircled by armies, then you may be sure that her destruction is near' (21:20). Later in the chapter Luke has Jesus say 'I tell you this: the present generation will see it all' (21:32). On the other hand, the coming of the mysterious Son of Man in glory has yet to happen, and these events precede his coming.

Advent teaches us that the fractures in our fallen world are too fundamental to be healed by human efforts alone, whether those focus on personal improvement or social transformation. Advent invites us to acknowledge the depths of our plight — our estrangement from God, and thereby from God's creation, our vulnerability to war — and to recognise our need of God's own deliverance.

At the same time, the Advent hope is that God will, at a time of God's choosing, complete the work begun in the earthly ministry of Christ. Sometimes hope in God arrives when there isn't much else to hope for. The "last day" is the focus of our Gospel reading, in which Jesus says signs and omens precede the final coming of God's Kingdom. So even in uncertain and 'fearful' circumstances, he tells his disciples (like the choir in Devonport) "Stand upright and hold your heads high"! Why? "because your redemption is drawing near". Their posture is to be expectant and confident in God, and they are also to be vigilant, "so that [their] hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life".

Our epistle reading likewise summons us to watch and wait, with faithfulness and patience. Paul prays that the hearts of the Thessalonians will be "strengthened in holiness" so they will be found "blameless" when their Lord returns.

The rhythms of contemporary life make it ever harder to watch and wait with faithfulness. The majority of our time may be consumed with the tasks and pressures of work and care ("the worries of this life"), or spent on consumption through the retail and entertainment industries ("dissipation and drunkenness", and endless episodes of *Strictly* and *Britain Lacks Talent*). The profusion of labour-saving devices has not led to a discernible increase in the time we spend sitting still, whether with God, our neighbours, or ourselves.

The vigilance to which we are called in Advent is very different from the passivity induced by consumerism. We wait, upright and with our heads held high, for God's coming. And we wait because we believe the current state of the world to be neither how things are meant to be, nor how they ultimately will be. To look forward to Christ's coming in glory is to refuse to make our peace with the world as it is, and to rejoice in what, in Christ, we have already been given. For both Church and society, the turbulence of our times makes complacency less plausible. Instead of being immersed in anxious activity or passive consumption, Advent summons us to be a people who wait — vigilant and expectant — for the deliverance of God.

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