



THOUGHTS FOR ADVENT SUNDAY

29 NOVEMBER 2020

Advent

Mark 13:24-37

Advent as a season holds a visceral attraction for me. Partly this is due to the hymns we customarily sing at this time. One example is the magnificent Cennick and Wesley hymn, *Lo, he comes, with clouds descending*, sung to the grand tune Helmsley. Inspired by the seventh verse of Chapter 1 of the Book of Revelation, it clearly speaks of the second coming of Jesus Christ, in majesty, and that is, of course, one of the traditional themes that we explore each Advent, setting the first coming, as a vulnerable infant in disadvantageous circumstances, at Christmas, into an eternal context.

In today's gospel reading, and Advent Sunday sees the start of a new liturgical year, 'B', when the Sunday gospel readings are generally taken from Mark; Jesus' words to his disciples seem to speak directly of this second coming. The same held last year at the start of Year A (Matthew) and will again next, at the start of Year C (Luke), for all three synoptic gospels contain a similar passage, and all are appointed to be read on this Sunday of the year. An article I read recently (in *Transforming Ministries* once again), pointed out that, whilst we easily see these words of Jesus describing what looks to us like his second coming, referring to some event still in our future, it is quite as likely that the writers of the gospels saw them as applying to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, which, for the Jewish Christians, as for all the Jews at the time, must have seemed the end of everything, at least everything material and earthly. This must, then have presented any early Christians after 70 AD with a problem, because Jerusalem had decisively fallen, but the Son of Man had not 'come in clouds'. But Jesus is at pains to point out to his disciples that they would not know when any of these apocalyptic things would happen – their job was to keep awake, keep alert, and ready to respond when the time did come. This is, of course, another great theme of Advent – the being prepared – that applies as much to our generation as it did in the early church.

Significant though these themes may be, they do not fully explain to me wherein lies the attraction of the season. To try to understand that better I go to another Advent hymn, one of my all-time favourites, *O come, O come Emmanuel*, wonderfully complemented by the tune *Veni Emmanuel*, adapted by T. Helmore as *The English Hymnal* tells me, 'from a French Missal'. Based as it is on the 'Great 'O'' antiphons it has its roots 1,200 years ago in the monastic tradition. Not surprisingly it also is based on the idea of the second coming, but in this case Emmanuel is coming, not only in 'glorious majesty' but with the object of rescue – rescue from exile - rescue from the 'dread caverns of the grave' and from 'nether hell', or the hell that lurks close by, full of nameless dread - rescue from the 'long night's lingering gloom', that gloom that envelopes so much of life, which is more existing than living, and 'the shadows of the tomb', that fear of death that is so prevalent but so unconfessed – and rescue from death itself, with the promise of setting foot on 'the heavenward road'. These themes must have seemed very attractive to a religious order in a chilly monastery in mid-winter in the ninth century when they were first penned and then sung; a time when lives were short and hard, even for the religious. They have, however, for as long as I can remember, spoken to me in the same way, or, at least to that part of me that feels a sense of disquiet – that things in life are not all that they should, or could be. I have felt it often before, but never more so than this year, when, with the Covid-19 plague disrupting so much of life, and threatening life itself, we find ourselves in a world much more precarious than we had grown accustomed to think. There is a sense of disquiet abroad, and a yearning for rescue. We might see that in the arrival of vaccines, and I am sure we all give thanks for the splendid work that has been done in their development, but having had exposed all the deficiencies in our world order as we have these past months, surely we cannot hope to go back to just the way we were before? If we do, all the horrors of deprivation will continue to exist; all the threats of climate change will accelerate; all the misery of war and strife, and the empty triumph of the rich, cruel and powerful will be all that we have to shew for the past months. The Advent hope is for a rescue from all this, for a charting of a new course that leads to glory.

*O come, O come, Emmanuel
Redeem thy captive Israel
From the dread caverns of the grave and nether hell thy people save
Dispel the long night's lingering gloom and pierce the shadows of the tomb
Safeguard for us the heavenward road and bar the way to death's abode
Come in glorious majesty!*

Clive Lemmon