

Advent 1 BCP services

The Dean reflects on our experience of time on Advent Sunday.

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 21:1-11

December, winter in the northern hemisphere, and that means waking up in the dark.

A moment or more of disorientation, anxiety or uncertainty. Lying under the blankets or the duvet feeling reluctant to put a leg out into the cold. Perhaps, it is even worse, and you experience a sense of dread about the day ahead. My mother, who suffered life long depression and anxiety described this feeling first thing in the morning as the “blue meanies”.

St Paul thought of us and his Roman readers, cosy under the covers, clinging on to sleep, attached to the past, and not quite ready to adjust to the reality of the new day.

Get up! He writes.

Salvation is near, the day is near at hand.

It's time!

Time for what?

If we shake off our sleep, and climb out of bed, what will we see?

I've been up and about before the sun several times in the past couple of weeks. I can't claim to have flung off the duvet full of expectation and joy. But I've often been energised by the beautiful dawn light, where apricot clouds stripe across a deep violet sky, where the crescent moon is still hanging there, but you know that the full light of day is just minutes away. In that light the day feels full of hope and promise.

This is what Paul wants us to see.

This is how Paul wants us to see the coming Kingdom.

Although it is not yet here, all the signs are can be seen.

It's time for us to get up and get dressed. To put on the armour of light.

It's time for us behave as if the day had already dawned.

It's time for us to stand in front of Christ the King.

Paul doesn't say those things in this passage, but the compilers of the Book of Common Prayer clearly had that in mind when they set this passage for the first Sunday in Advent. In the rhythm of the liturgical year, this is the time we are invited to focus on the coming of Jesus, not only in the incarnation, in his birth that we will celebrate at Christmas, but at the end of time when he will come as our King and judge.

It's time.

It's divine time not human time, *kairos* not *chronos*, cyclical and cosmic time, not linear time.

Paul was still, just about, living in a period when the second coming might have been imminent. But it is more likely that he was wrestling with a different understanding, describing something that was both “now and not yet”. Like the dawn, which is not the day, when we experience the sun as “now and not yet” staining the sky with colour and light, although we can’t actually see it.

The Kingdom is coming, the King is coming, coming in judgement.

Throughout Advent we will sing and hear, music looking forward to the arrival of the King in cosmic glory - Lo, he comes in clouds descending.

Yet again, the BCP, points us in a different direction. We are not given a passage from the book of Daniel, or Revelation this morning. We don’t read of a king on a throne, surrounded by angels or choirs. Instead, we read the account of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, meekly sitting on a donkey. It is almost a parody of earthly power. Just as we are used to seeing our royal family riding in golden carriages surrounded by soldiers in uniforms embellished in gold braid, the population of Jerusalem would have seen their Roman rulers clattering by on horseback accompanied by trumpeters, banner carriers and soldiers in shining breastplates. By contrast, Jesus must have looked a strange sight, a grown man, sitting on a little donkey, with his skirts hitched up.

It's a reminder that the sovereignty of God will be radically different from our experience of earthly power. And that the one who comes to judge us is the one who allowed himself to be judged by us, tortured, and executed at the hands of his sisters and brothers, and returned to forgive us.

This is the reminder that the Kingdom for which we look expectantly is a kingdom of mercy and compassion, of forgiveness and love.

It's Advent, it's time....

In the now and not yet, where might we see the dawning light and encourage others to see it as well?

In a nation whose government has just agreed to pursue the possibility of making assisted suicide legal, for example, how do we judge between light and darkness?

For some, this is a deeply personal question. If there has been suicide in your family, or you have watched a loved one experience the end of life in undignified discomfort or pain, this is not an abstract ethical dilemma. God knows that as well as us.

While the healing miracles of Jesus point to a Kingdom where there is no more physical suffering, no more mental anguish, no more sadness – Jesus own suffering reminds us that he knows what it feels like in the “not yet” of life as we experience it.

I do not believe that there is a simple answer to the question. I respect deeply those who believe that this legislation is entirely wrong, but it’s hard to look in the face of someone dying of motor neurone disease, who one day will no longer be able to swallow or breathe without medical assistance and tell them that we will strive officiously to keep them alive regardless of their own wishes.

Jesus himself told his followers, “death is not the worst thing that can happen to you”, separation from God is far worse.

We could stay in the dark, put the covers over our heads and hope that the day never comes.

Or we could get up and put on the armour of light.

It's time to wake up and get dressed!

Imagine if you could wrap yourself in that rosy dawn light ready to face the day. Imagine if you were armed against the forces of evil, all that distracts us, all that gets between us and God.

It's time to scan the horizon and see the light that is dawning.

Be alert to the signs of God's presence already here, name them for yourself, point them out to others, just as you would a beautiful sunrise.

It's time to greet Christ our King.

This Advent, it's time to recommit ourselves, to renew our allegiance to the one true King and the one true Kingdom.

May God give us the grace to use the time that is given to us well, alert to its possibilities and mindful of our frailty, through Christ our Lord. Amen.