

The Last Judgement

First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 64:1-9

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

The theme that runs through all today's readings is that of the end of the world. Or to put it another way, the day when God will intervene directly in the life of the world. In taking up this theme, both Jesus and Paul are speaking in ways that very clearly echo the Old Testament prophets. The earlier Old Testament prophets, such as Isaiah, spoke of God acting in simple human terms, military and political. They spoke to a Jewish people who were very clearly a nation – and for some centuries two distinct nations. Their time of political dominance was relatively short – just three reigns, those of Saul, David and Solomon. In the centuries that followed they lived in varying degrees of subjection to foreign empires – Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Greece. And at various times they were subject to invasions, military defeat and humiliation. And the prophets spoke to these situations. In good times they gave warnings; and in bad times they gave consolation.

The warnings are directed to those who worshipped other gods, those who neglected the one true God and whose apostasy showed itself in social injustice. As Isaiah puts it at the beginning of his prophecies:

Ah, you who call evil good and good evil,
who put darkness for light and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!
Ah, you who are wise in your own eyes,
and shrewd in your own sight!
Ah, you who are heroes in drinking wine
and valiant at mixing drink,
who acquit the guilty for a bribe,
and deprive the innocent of their rights!

Isaiah 5:21-23

God's reaction to this wickedness is expressed in military and political terms: Judah will be invaded, subjugated. What an historian might see simply as political events Isaiah sees as theological events. God is acting through them. This results in a startling image when the nation of Assyria, which is threatening Israel and ultimately invades it, is described by Isaiah as a 'Rod of Anger', sent by God. (Isaiah 10:5) It cannot have made him popular: any Church of England bishop who in World War II had described the German army as the rod of God's anger would have been given short shrift.

The reading we heard today from the end of Isaiah includes words of confession:

We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

Isaiah 64:9

And the prophets are all very clear that God responds to a nation who turns from social justice. In fact the book of Isaiah contains some of the most loved words of consolation, words that are now regarded as prophecies of the coming of Christ:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
on those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
For a child has been born for us, a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:2-6

Isaiah may have thought he was writing of a great but conventional political leader; many of Jesus' contemporaries thought the same. We may regard Jesus as a great leader; we may regard him as a political leader; but he was certainly not conventional.

So, Isaiah and his contemporaries interpreted political and military events in a theological way. Daniel and the later prophets thought in a more dramatic and supernatural way; and it is his way of thinking that influences the way Jesus speaks. He does not speak of armies or leaders but of the sun darkening, the moon and stars falling from heaven and then the Son of Man coming in the clouds. And the purpose is no longer to bring and earthly rewards and earthly punishments, but heavenly, eternal ones. This is the last judgment.

Talk of the last judgment can bring two kinds of extreme reactions. It can bring anxiety. What will become of me? Will I be found wanting? Have I done enough good? Jesus will have none of this anxiety: the words he spoke to Jairus, whose daughter had died, could just as well have been spoken to us:

Do not fear, only believe.

Mark 5:36

Or it can bring complacency: I will not be found wanting; I have done well; I have certainly lived a better life than anyone else I know. Jesus has even less time for complacency. He told a story about a farmer who had a good harvest and decided to take life easy and have a long retirement on the strength of it. But God had other ideas:

You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you.
And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

Luke 12:20

So if Jesus condones neither anxiety nor complacency what does he advise? The answer is simple: alertness. Whereas anxiety and complacency are about dwelling in the past, alertness is about living in the present. Jesus explicitly commends living in the present when he says

Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

Matthew 6:34

Modern psychology commends the same living in the present with emphasis in mindfulness. Live in the present: it is all you have.

For Christians, living in the present, being alert, is being aware that God will speak to us in every situation. The parable we heard last week was all about that. The goats were astonished when Jesus accused them of not caring for him; the sheep were rather taken back when Jesus praised them because they did care for him. What the sheep had done was to recognize Christ in the sick, the hungry, the destitute, the refugees and the prisoner. They had been alert; the goats had not.

But being alert, recognizing Christ in everyone is not about a sentimental gushing of indiscriminate support. On the contrary, Jesus told his disciples to be 'wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Because I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves'. Matthew 10:16. In every situation we need to ask where we see Jesus and what he is calling us to do.

That, in part, is what Paul means when he wrote that 'you are not lacking for any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.' The Holy Spirit will give us as the Church the gifts, the tools if you like, to carry out whatever ministry is needed. We are not limited by our own natural gifts. The response 'I cannot do that' is sometimes realistic; but sometimes it is a lack of faith. Jesus calls us to live dangerously.

Isaiah has a rather gentler image:

You are our father; we are the clay and you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

Isaiah 64:8

We are called to be something better than we are now. But we will become what we are meant to be not simply by our own efforts but the grace of the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit will make us as the potter moulds the clay. Our contribution is simple; we must be alert to where God is working in the world and his Holy Spirit in our lives.

That is the heart of Advent.

N Clews

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