

ADVENT 1 C 2024

ST MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS

Jeremiah 33: 14-16

Psalms 25

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Luke 21: 25-36

FATHER JORDAN GREATBATCH

"En ma Fin gît mon Commencement..."
"In my End is my Beginning..."

This is the saying which Mary Queen of Scots had embroidered on her cloth of estate whilst in prison in England and is the theme running through her life. It symbolises the eternity of life after death and Mary probably drew her inspiration from the emblem adopted by her grandfather-in-law, François I of France: the salamander. The Salamander self-ignites at the end of its life, and then rises up from the ashes re-born...

The message is that beginnings and endings belong together. One leads into the other.

Advent, the beginning of a new Church year, is the time to where we go to the end where we prepare

ourselves for Christmas. Not the Christmas of jollification. For we do not encounter the sweet baby Jesus, but the stern, adult Jesus, picturing the whole universe being shaken and turned upside down.

But prepare we do. For it is the preparation of our celebration of God in our midst in the person of Jesus. This is quite a different celebration. Strangely, as we celebrate the beginning of God in our midst in the person of Jesus, we look at the end of time. The return of Christ and the end of the world are the themes at the beginning of Advent. What we see in the beginning, we will also see in the end. As we see God coming to us at the beginning of Jesus' life, so we will see God coming to us at the end of time in the return of Christ.

This is certainly the image we are given in our reading from Luke today. The reading takes place in the events just prior to Holy Thursday and Jesus is giving His final teachings to His apostles before His passion begins.

It is a teaching filled with symbols. We hear of signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and that earth nations of the earth will be in dismay, perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves. As usual in apocalyptic writings, we deal here with the language

of poetic truth, not literal truth. Hence it is fruitless to tie symbols to actual historical events in attempting to predict, for example, the exact date of Christ's second coming. Though of course that doesn't stop many doing so throughout history and even today.

For whichever way we may conceive it the reality is that people are always fascinated with the end of the world. There are always people who want to predict the end of the world. There have been many such predictions over the years. But Jesus tells us we do not know when it will happen. As he says in the Gospel of Matthew 'Nobody knows the day or the hour when all these things will happen. Only God the Father knows when they will happen.'

The only thing we need to concern ourselves with is that God will be at the end, as God was at the beginning, and is present now.

Some people say that the end has already happened in the person of Jesus. They tell us we are living in the end times. Others say the end time is our death; others that the end is a cosmic event on a grand scale as depicted in our readings today.

The New Testament is not entirely clear in its details about the end, nor about the return of Christ. However, our Gospel reading from Luke today gives us a hint of what things may take place.

The first is that Jesus will return. This is a constant theme of the preaching of the early church. Secondly, we cannot know when it will happen. Thirdly, we must always be ready.

The scriptures imply St Paul was convinced Jesus would return in his lifetime. He had to change his view of when the return did not happen but it still dominated his thought and action. It was Jesus' return that sparked Paul into action. The missionary journeys of Paul were the result of his desire that many should know Christ before his return.

The same thing happened around the year 1000. There was much speculation about the end of the world and the return of Jesus. What did the people do then? Well, they built churches, established hospitals, religious communities and places of learning. They spent much time and energy proclaiming the Christian faith by making their society a better place to live. This was done simply out of a desire to be ready for Christ's return. And so, we are called to do

the same. We are to begin afresh, not just on a calendar, but in individual hearts, in relationships, in congregations, and in our yearning for a promise worth living for. We are bidden to live lives of faithful, active waiting in the meantime because we hear again the name of the One who holds us in the ending time.

I suppose for most of us we tend not to think too much about the end of the world or the second coming of Jesus. Advent is the time when our readings don't let us forget it. Here at our beginning, we are reminded of the end. How on earth are we to take these things into account in our lives.

First I think we are asked to live with a sense of responsibility. The readings all stress things like honesty, integrity, and an increase in love. Responsible living shows we take seriously the coming of Christ. Responsible living is our attempt to care for others as well as for ourselves. We do this simply to be prepared. When we come to our end, it will reflect our beginning.

As we move into the Christmas season, let us not get so single-mindedly over-preparing for Christmas that we forget God's vision for the world -- a vision that is God's to control, a vision that is far broader and more expansive than either/or thinking can

allow. What is at stake is not just another annual celebration or making Christmas memories with friends and family. What is at stake is the coming of the kingdom of heaven, which, Jesus reminds us, is both already and not yet here.

The other thing I think is asked of us is to live with a sense of expectancy. To live with the second coming in mind is to live with hope. The end will be like the beginning. What we make of life now will be what we make of it at the end.

So our end and our beginning are one and the same thing. One leads into the other.

As the great poet TS Eliot put it:

The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and to know the place for the first time.