

First Sunday of Advent 2016

Fr Jarred Mercer

Isaiah 2.1-5

Psalm 122

Romans 13.11-14

Matthew 24.37-44

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit

Advent is a major disruption to our 'ordinary time'. It is a new liturgical season, it is a completely new year—and given the overall tragedy that 2016 seems to have been, perhaps a welcomed one. But Advent marks the awaiting of something more, not a new year, not a new season, but an entirely new world.

This is not some symbolic 'waiting' that we do each year to reenact the story of Jesus, ending by putting a nice little plastic baby in a crib and saying 'Happy Christmas!' Our new liturgical year is a bold

confession of an *actual newness* brought about by God in the world. We are awaiting a new, *healed*, redeemed world—a new beginning. And this newness, this utter, impossible newness, is a gift given by God—the awaited gift of justice, the gift of *peace*, our readings speak about, is a gift given in the very presence of God among us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Advent is a season about hope; it trains us up in hoping. Hope for the coming Messiah, hope for the fulfilment of God's purposes, hope for *peace*.

It seems a bit hallow, however, to be filled with hope. Our streets in glitter and lights and cheesy pop holiday tunes while five million children die each year in poverty and sixty-two individuals hold half of the world's wealth. Hope in the midst of a year surrounded by fear, oppression, the rise of nationalist powers, including the election in my home country of a dangerous demagogue who has intentionally exploited racial tensions in a divided

nation, played upon the fears of the vulnerable, and scapegoated powerless victims in an effort to gain power; in the midst of broken families, refugee orphans, and the list goes on and on.

We creep towards Christmas, the source of our joy and end goal of our hope, in a world that appears completely without it.

But Christian hope looks beyond our current situation to a new life that passes through the deepest darkness of the world, even death, into resurrection.

There is a danger here, however, of placing our hope in a 'pie-in-the-sky' sort of spirituality: none of the evil around us matters, none of the pain or sorrow makes any real difference, because one day, some day, all will be well.

We might call this pious half-truth of hope the hope of *escapism*. Our Christian hope means, on this

understanding, that we will escape the world and all its problems.

It is a slippery and dangerous misconceived hope: a hope mistaken for comfort, security, safety, and certainty. A sort of hope which just says, 'don't worry, everything is alright'.

I've heard a lot of this, actually, from American Christians following the election of the aforementioned demagogue: 'It's Okay, because true hope comes from Christ'; 'we are citizens of heaven, not this world'. But this just isn't good enough, I'm afraid!

This does not square with the story of our salvation presented to us in the Bible and ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ himself. The fact that this long awaited hope *comes to us*, the fact that our hope is historicised, embodied, *incarnated*, necessarily means that to escape this world would actually be to

miss out on our great hope. *Our hope is here*. Our hope touches down in to the midst of *this* reality.

At the centre of Christian hope is the fact that we do not escape ourselves and our world, leaving it behind in its misery, in order to get to God somehow.

Christianity is not some cop-out brand of escapism. The whole point is that God comes to us, that the hope that we await is *Emmanuel*, God with us.

Christ is the timeless divine Love invading our time-bound humanity, so that our great hope happens *here*, in the midst of all the good and the bad, the joy and the sorrow, the love and the hate.

And we, then, as Christ's body are called to continue to infuse this world with that Love. Waiting, *hoping*, for our coming salvation is not to sit on our hands in passivity, it is a call to action: '*beating* our swords into poughshares', 'laying aside the darkness and putting on the armour of light'. And take note, this is not just a negative resistance to something—putting

away the sword—, it is a further positive, active, contribution: ploughing, getting to work on the field!

Christian hope is not escaping the world, it is not ignoring the world, it is an *overcoming* of the world.

True Advent hope, true Christian hope, is a movement, a pulling of the world towards its final destiny in Christ, when he comes again in glory and all things are made new. The Church exists to drive the world towards this renewal, to create a world which breathes in as much of the life of new creation as possible. We cannot yet see the Kingdom of God as the reality of every corner of the universe, but we can live as the best and clearest picture of it possible. We pray, 'Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done', not because we desire rest or comfort in this life, but because the Church is engaged in continual struggle.

As hopeful people, we are not optimists. Christian hope, is not modern love of progress, it is not Enlightenment optimism that says, 'whatever

happens, it will all be alright, because a bunch of rich, well-educated white guys in wigs are running things'.

On the contrary, Christian hope has been defined as 'the indispensable link between faith and love: the affirmation of real possibilities for the world and oneself, the awareness of a promise for the future, which gives to the person the freedom to give [oneself] away, to God and to [one's] neighbor, with liberated imagination and with a generosity unhampered by the anxious need to secure the future on [one's] own'.¹

This hope is the opposite of comfort and security: it is losing our own security and certainty, and *risking* it all for others. The only hope for the world, our only hope, is the self-giving love of God. And love is always a risky business.

¹ Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 2003), 217.

This kind of risky love is hopeful, indeed, *is* our hope, because this is the kind of love that brings about the radical and impossible newness of the Kingdom of God. The self-giving, other-focussed, love of God overcomes the world and de-thrones earthly powers. The powers of this world that oppress the weak, impoverish the poor, marginalise others through violence and exclusion.

Our hope in Advent, then, means joining in on the risky love of God, because the self-serving, idolatrous power of the world is not most basically found in ISIS, or the White House, or 10 Downing Street, or the Banks. It is mainly due to the continual small failures of all of us in generous love. Each of my own minor self-indulgences, thoughtless cruelties, or doctoring of the truth to get my own way links up with and reinforces the injustice of the world we live in. It has been said, 'If the world invites us to despair,

it is largely because of our ordinary, undramatic selfishness'.²

Our Advent active hoping, is a struggle against injustice—beginning with our own—; it is an ushering in of God's Kingdom: an outburst of risky self-giving love. There is no mere optimism here, no mere wishful thinking, and certainly not a 'way out' or escape. Hoping is a work of transforming love, eradicating our own mundane selfishness, so that the whole world, and all the workings of our fallen existence, are entirely turned upside down. Our expectant waiting upon the Lord, our hoping, is participation in the risky, self-giving love of God, by which all things are made new.

So Advent is an invitation and glorious calling: 'Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord' (Isaiah 2.5). For 'it is full time now for [us] to wake from

² Herbert McCabe, *God, Christ and Us* (London: Continuum, 2003), 11-12.

sleep, for salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed' (Romans 13.11).