HOMILY FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT YEAR A

27 NOVEMBER 2016 ST BENET’S HALL

Our readings today for the first Sunday of Advent in Year A of the cycle of readings, seem to give two rather different messages, which may seem at first to be somewhat distinct from one another, maybe even in tension. In the first reading from the prophet Isaiah and in psalm 121 there is a pilgrimage theme (we are on a journey to Jerusalem, that is to God), while in the second reading from the letter of St Paul to the Romans and from the gospel of Matthew, there is a Second Coming of Christ theme (we await the return of Christ and the coming of the new heaven and the new earth at the end of time).

There is a magnificent vision at the beginning of the second chapter of Isaiah. It is of the mountain of the Temple of the Lord towering over the other mountains and of all the nations streaming towards it ‘Come let us go to the mountain of the Lord, to the Temple of the God of Jacob that he may teach us his ways so that we may walk in his paths’. Walking in the paths of the Lord is above all to choose the way of peace ‘Nation will not lift sword against nation, there will be no more training for war’. The meaning of the word ‘Jerusalem’ is ‘vision of peace’. Five times in the short passage, there are words connected to journey or pilgrimage, concluding ‘O House of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord’. Then this theme is immediately picked up in the responsorial psalm 121, one of the gradual psalms, recited by pilgrims making their way to the Temple of the Lord, to meet God, to receive his blessing of peace: ‘Let us go to God’s house … May peace reign in your walls, in your palaces, peace!’

It is a wonderful and rightly popular image that our lives are a journey and a pilgrimage, which we only understand aright if we see them in terms of a search for God and at last find peace in him. Jean Leclercq in a very fine book, the sort one would have loved to have been able to write, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, about the monastic theology of the early middle ages, says in words which can be applied today to any serious Christian, since today any serious Christian has to live to a marked degree, mentally at least, in separation from the world that ‘The monastery is then a Jerusalem in anticipation, a place of waiting and of desire, of preparation for that holy city toward which we look with joy. What matters is not the location of the city [which can be physically in any place], it is the life that is led there, that is to say God’s own life.’ So then the heart of a Christian is in journeying on pilgrimage to God, to his city, the Jerusalem which is above and which awaits us, the place of peace and love. And the way to journey, to make the pilgrimage, is to live the life of God. The way to God is God.

So far so good. The language of pilgrimage and journey seems to be near universal and still to speak eloquently now as to the monks and Christians of the past. But then in the second reading and in the gospel, the direction seems to change. Here it is not that we journey a pilgrim way to God under the impetus of our own longing and yearning. Now rather it is Christ who breaks into our world and who makes visitation upon us, it is Christ who comes, it may be unwanted, like a thief in the night, sprung on us like a trap, in his Second Coming, closing down our plots and plans (but surely not we think before we finish all that has to be accomplished by the end of term, before we complete on our current development plan?) and disturbing us in our rather too settled ways. ‘The night is nearly over’ says St Paul towards the end of his letter to the Romans ‘it will be daylight soon’. So let us live in the light. ‘No drunken orgies, no promiscuity or licentiousness’. Good heavens no, that it not us at all. But then ‘no wrangling or jealousy’. Maybe that is getting closer to home. St Paul’s list of sins like this one seem to move from the exotic and the extreme, maybe only on secret dream lists, to the more everyday, closer to home.

Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, says that the Son of Man will come like a burglar, like a thief in the night. Apart from a parallel mention in the Gospel of Luke, the thief image is used also in the second letter of Peter: ‘The Day of the Lord will come like a thief’ and twice in Revelation, now in the first person ‘I will come to you like a thief and you have no idea at what hour I shall come upon you’. St Therese of Lisieux had a particular liking for this image, describing Jesus as her welcome thief. We may not be quite so sure as the saint that we are ready to be despoiled just yet.

In the Gospel the thief image is used to prompt readiness: ‘stay awake’, ‘stand ready’. What this staying awake means for Matthew is made clear in the chapter which follows today’s passage with its three great parables: the bridesmaids who are to be ready with lamps and oil, the servants who are to yield interest for their Lord and above all the sheep who are placed on the right side of the Lord, because they served him hidden in those who needed their love. We stay awake and stand ready, Jesus tells us by doing what he has been saying we should do since the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew, by walking the way of the Beatitudes, by loving God and neighbour. Both the image of the pilgrimage and the image of the coming of the Son of Man are saying a similar thing: we go to God and we stand, awake and ready for him, by living God’s life of love. The opening prayer of today’s Mass put it this way: ‘Grant your faithful people … the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds at his coming, so that, gathered at his right hand, they may be worthy to possess the heavenly Kingdom’. But here we do not merely walk, but we run. ‘The time’ says St Paul ‘is nearer now than when we first believed. Advent is the urgent season.

When Archbishop Thomas Cranmer put together in the middle of the 16th century, a lectionary for his Book of Common Prayer for the Church of England, he copied to a very large extent the traditional medieval readings for seasons and feasts. It is an irony of Church History that the reform of the Roman missal in the late 16th century changed a number of the readings including the Gospel for the First Sunday of Advent. So the place today where you can find the medieval Gospel for Advent Sunday is the BCP. Enough of this footnote, which in any case one only advances with trepidation in the presence of liturgical experts, but what was this Gospel? The Advent Gospel was the one we think belongs on Palm Sunday, the story of Jesus’ triumphant entry on a donkey into Jerusalem. This reminds us firstly that all we have, even if we may think we are being given literal descriptions of the Second Coming of Christ, is an image of a reality which remains beyond and above and in front of us. And secondly it tells us that on our pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to that city of the living God, it is Jesus, the most unlikely King, humble and riding on a donkey, the surprising one, the thief in the night, who goes before us. And we enter the Kingdom only with and in him.