

HAVANT 17/11/19 Second Sunday before Advent (Yr C)

November is sometimes called the month of the Holy Souls. For the past fortnight, the readings and prayers have concentrated on those who have gone before us: on all the saints whose earthly lives were transformed by grace, on all the holy souls for whom we prayed God's mercy and forgiveness and on the victims of war. All Saints, All Souls and Remembrance Sunday. But now our readings turn us in a different direction: towards the future. Advent, the season of the future, begins a fortnight today. (One of the two meanings of the word "advent" is "the future").

During these last few weeks before Advent, and even more during the season itself, the readings and prayers at all the services help us to look forward..

Our attitude towards the future is one of the most distinctive features of Christianity. The kind of future we expect is revealed by the other meaning of the word "advent", which is "coming". Of course, we are looking forward to celebrating the coming of Jesus at Christmas, but we are also looking forward to his coming again, his second coming, when the whole meaning of history and the whole meaning of each of our lives will be made clear.

In some churches, these weeks before Advent are called the "kingdom season" in which we are faced with fundamental questions about what it means to pray sincerely "thy kingdom come." It started, as I said, with All Saints, immediately followed by All Souls' Day when we prayed for all who have died, that they will be forgiven their sins and receive a merciful judgment. It continues on until the end of Advent with the traditional Advent themes, the so-called four last things, death, judgment, heaven and hell. That's why judgement is one of the themes of this time of year - perhaps not a very fashionable idea these days, but that is all the more reason to pay it some attention. We got some stark warnings about this in this morning's readings.

All human beings are sinners and do not deserve any mercy for our sins, but we know that in Jesus God has himself borne the sins of the world and their punishment, which is why in the Prayer Book Communion Service we used to pray that God would “*not weigh our merits but pardon our offences.*” Faced with the certainty and awfulness of judgment, our characteristic theme during the period between now and Christmas is not fear but hope. And hope is not for us what so many people seem to think it is, wishful thinking, but a well-founded confidence that the glimpses we have already had of God’s goodness will not disappoint us.

We know that in Jesus Christ, the Universal King we celebrate next Sunday, we have the most powerful advocate and defender when we come to judgment. It’s worth remembering that Jesus is the advocate who defends us against the attacks of Satan,(whose name means “adversary” or “enemy” and whose function is always to undermine us, to make us feel guilty and accuse us .)

But against such an accuser, we know that on the basis of what God has already shown us, and above all in sending Jesus at the first Christmas, we can face the future without fear.

Humanly speaking, of course, anxiety about the future is pretty widespread. Think of the millions of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers who can seek no hope in their homelands or those living under the constant threat of war or terrorism; think of those in many parts of the country today driven from their homes by floods. And perhaps for all of us there are fears about the economic or political situation, or worries about our increasingly unpredictable and extreme weather.

This isn’t however a sermon about any of the particular struggles facing the world at the moment. On the whole I don’t think such things are proper themes for the pulpit, which is the place for proclaiming our Christian hope. And so today even though we may feel like we are standing on the brink of a precipice I want to reassure you that even if we fall over the

edge God will not have changed and, in a memorable phrase from Deuteronomy, *“underneath are the everlasting arms.”* Or, as Jesus put it, *“In the world you will have trouble, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”*

Let me remind you too of some words from a letter written by the prophet Jeremiah to God’s people in exile in Babylon.

The Lord says, my plans for you are peace and not disaster, to give you a future and a hope. When you call to me and come and pray to me, I shall listen to you. When you search for me, you will find me; when you search wholeheartedly for me, I shall let you find me. The Lord says, I shall restore your fortunes and gather you in from all the nations and wherever I have driven you, I shall bring you back to the place from which I exiled you.

The long history of the Old Testament people of God was marked by many tragedies and setbacks during which they were tempted to despair. National disasters are always hard to bear, but how much more so if you believed that God had a special purpose for you. So when Jerusalem was overrun, the Temple vandalised and most of the leaders of the people were deported to Babylon in the sixth century BC it was more than a political catastrophe; it made people doubt their faith and even God himself.

Jeremiah was one of the prophets God used both to remind the people of their own shortcomings and to promise them a new future. When restoration came, people looked back on the exile as a decisive turning point in their history; their gratitude led them to new faithfulness which would see them through the very worst that world could throw at them. Exile and restoration came to occupy a symbolic and central place in OT Judaism, the faith of Jesus himself, and faith which God renewed and reconfirmed through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

All of this is directly relevant to where we find ourselves at the moment - you can take your pick whether I am speaking about this moment being life in general or faced as with are with all sorts of rather scary uncertainties in the world. Some of you may have read in one of the papers this morning about the latest dismissive word for people of our generation: “boomers”. We, well most of us at least, are among those who have lived through a period of unprecedented stability, prosperity and optimism in our life as a nation. Although the benefits of that have been far from having been fairly shared, there has been a general sense that we knew the grounds rules of our political and social life. Surprisingly quickly, the foundations have been shaken and everything seems up for grabs. No wonder we are feeling uncertain what to think and do, especially as a general election looms. Scary times, indeed.

But we can rely on the God who has been faithful in the past to be faithful in the future. The God who delivered the exiles from Babylon, the God who revealed himself in Jesus, the God who raised Jesus from the grave is the God who will be faithful in the future.

God’s faithfulness is beyond question. Ours is more doubtful. Let me encourage you to use the coming season of Advent to ask yourself, every day, how far you are willing to trust God for the future whatever it brings. Don’t presume on it, but trust God and ask him to increase your hope..