

## A thought for December

Advent means “coming” and “future”. During the season of Advent we look forward to celebrating Christ’s first coming, his birth in Bethlehem, and we look forward to his second, as judge.

One problem about this rather simple account is that it is all about the past, which is over and the future, which is yet to come. But we have to live in the present and need to know what Advent can mean for us here and now, while we both give thanks for the past and look forward to the future.

In a twelfth century Advent sermon, St Bernard of Clairvaux<sup>i</sup> gave some thought to this question and described a third coming of Jesus, “a road leading from his first coming to the last.”

“We know that the coming of the Lord is threefold: the third coming is between the other two and it is not visible in the way they are. At his first coming the Lord was seen on earth and lived among human beings, who saw him and hated him. At his last coming ‘all flesh shall see the salvation of our God’, and ‘they shall look on him whom they have pierced.’ In the middle, the hidden coming, only the chosen see him, and they see him within themselves; and so their souls are saved. The first coming was in flesh and weakness, the middle coming is in spirit and power, and the final coming will be in glory and majesty.

This middle coming is like a road that leads from the first coming to the last. At the first, Christ was our redemption; at the last, he will become manifest as our life; but in this middle way he is our rest and our consolation.

If it seems to anyone that I am inventing what I am saying about the middle coming, listen to the Lord himself: ‘If anyone loves me, he will keep my words, and the Father will love him, and we shall come to him.’ Elsewhere I have read: ‘Whoever fears the Lord does good things – but I think that what was said about whoever loves him was more important, because whoever loves him will keep his words. Where are these words to be kept? In the heart certainly, as the Prophet says, ‘I have hidden your sayings in my heart so that I do not sin against you.’

Keep the word of God in this way: Blessed are those who keep it. Let it penetrate deep into the core of your soul and then flow out again in your feelings and the way you behave. Feed on it well, and your soul delight in its rich nourishment. Do not forget to eat your bread, or your heart will dry up, but rather eat it up and your soul will be filled with abundance.

If you keep God’s word like this, there is no doubt that it will keep you, for the Son will come to you with the Father: the great Prophet will come, who will renew Jerusalem, and he is the one who makes all things new. For this is what this coming will do: just as we have been shaped in the earthly image, so will we be shaped in the heavenly image. Just as the old Adam was poured into the whole man and took possession of him, so in turn will Christ possess our whole humanity – he who created everything, has redeemed everything, and will glorify everything.”

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<sup>i</sup> 1090 – 1153 Cistercian reformer and abbot: Sermon 5 for Advent