



Advent 2, Year B – December 4, 2011

2 Peter 3.8-15a

A Homily preached by the Venerable M. Ansley Tucker

The season of Advent is largely misunderstood by many Christians – by many Anglicans, even. We tend to think of it as the ramp-up to Christmas, the religious corollary to putting up the Christmas lights, going to office parties and shopping till we drop. One has only to turn on the radio, or to visit the local mall, to be drowning in tinsel and glitter, and Christmas muzak pollution.

Thus inculturated, it is probably no surprise that many Christians experience a radical “disconnect” when they attend their local church during Advent. The hangings are purple. The readings are invariably about sin and repentance, and a final day of judgment. The closest we come to a Christmas carol is “O come, O come, Emmanuel.” And the rector won’t let us put up the Christmas tree until Advent 4.

So what gives? What is Advent, really?

Historically, Advent has concerned itself not so much with looking back to the coming of God into our midst as an infant (that is, Christmas), as with looking forward to a coming again, a return, of this same God, to judge the world. The great themes of Advent are related to a final and great “Day of Lord” – when God will finally stop waiting for us to get it right, and intervene mightily, to put things to right Godself. Consequently, Advent has traditionally been a season to consider what we call “the four last things” – death, judgment, heaven and hell. Not very Christmassy, is it?

But it explains the purple. It explains why John the Baptist, with his baptism for repentance, and predictions of fire and cleansing, figures so prominently in Advent. And it certainly explains today’s reading from 2 Peter, in which the writer is trying to explain why the Day of Lord has not yet happened, while yet expecting that in due course “the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolve, and elements will melt with fire.”

Now obviously, that expectation has not, even to this day, been met. And to be perfectly honest, the idea of a cataclysmic intervention by God to bring the world as we know it to an end, is less and less believable for modern people. We’re not quite sure what it means to say “Jesus is coming back,” and that when he does, “he will judge both the quick and the dead.” But this is not to say, I should add (and most vehemently), that we cannot fathom an extinction of life on earth as we know it – for in our own lifetimes both war and environmental degradation have brought us perilously close to death, judgment, heaven and hell.

In other words, even if we have trouble with the idea of a “second coming” (or second “advent”), we must surely be willing to entertain the implications of there being an *end* to things. This could be an ending as large as extinction, it could be an ending as little as the conclusion of this service. The point is simply this, that time, life (our life), is not just an endless cycle of get up, do stuff, go to bed, get up, do stuff, go to bed again. Time, in the Christian view of things, is going somewhere, which means that we are going somewhere.

Advent invites us to be mindful of endings, to fashion our lives in accordance with our understanding that we don’t have forever.

Think about this for a moment. Think about what difference it makes to know that our life, our relationships, the opportunities that present themselves to us, all have a shelf-life – in other words, are all *finite*.

Knowing that we don't have forever has a wonderful way of clarifying our sense of purpose, of focusing our efforts, and sorting out our priorities. I remember when my sister was dying, she used to give me gifts every time I would visit her – a jacket, a pair of earrings, something that belonged to our mother, just whatever. As she got closer and closer to her death, she worked harder and faster at unloading all these things, so that I would come back to Calgary with a *fistful* of jewellery, or a *suitcase* full of jackets. Why? Because time for my sister was a precious and limited commodity. She was on a mission, and the very believable prospect of an end to her earthly life, gave her a sense of urgency.

One of the gifts of the season of Advent is precisely this deeply ingrained sense of time as finite, of life as full of endings. The big ending of course is death. But there are countless other lines in the sand, aren't there? Countless other deadlines and last chances to do everything from following our dreams to reconciling with a loved one. Advent invites us to live our lives with purpose, with focus, and an intense awareness that we don't have forever.