

## SERMON PREACHED AT SJH ADVENT SUNDAY YEAR C 2 DECEMBER 2018

Today is Advent Sunday, the first of four Sundays before Christmas. I love the season of Advent. It's a time of joyful expectation. Looking ahead, from mid-December our liturgy – what we do in worship – will focus on Jesus' coming into this world as the child born of Mary. In this first part of the season our liturgy focuses on his second coming in glory to judge the world. In a sense it's the wrong way round, but that's how it is. There is a natural connection: both are about God acting through Jesus his Son to bring salvation.

'He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.' We say these words in the creed every Sunday. They are based on words of Jesus recorded in the gospels. In today's passage from S. Luke, Jesus says, "...they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory." That is in fact a quotation from the book of Daniel, in a passage we read last Sunday. We may also recall the parable of the sheep and goats in S. Matthew's gospel:

When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations... .

But this is not the only picture in the gospels. In S. John's gospel, Jesus implies that judgement happens in the present, based on our responses to him:

Truly, truly, I say to you, those who hear my word and believe him who sent me, have eternal life; they do not come into judgement, but have passed from death to life. (5.24)

It is possible to make a statement like 'He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,' provided we keep an open mind on how it is going to happen. This may help us to balance a belief in the second coming with the fact that in the conventional picture (clouds and angels) it hasn't happened yet.

The church has reinterpreted other prophecies, seeing them fulfilled in ways that weren't imagined when they were originally made. There's an example of this in today's reading from the prophet Jeremiah. He was writing roundabout 590 bc, when the land of Judah and its capital, Jerusalem, were under attack by a foreign army. In 586 the king was taken into exile. But Jeremiah writes,

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when...I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David... .

In other words, Jeremiah was prophesying that Judah would once again be ruled over by a king descended from David.

The Jewish people did return from exile after about fifty years, but the prophecy wasn't really fulfilled. The people had a governor rather than a king. The first governor, with the marvellous name Zerubbabel, was of David's line, but nothing further happened to restore the monarchy. However, the Christian church sees the prophecy being fulfilled by the birth of Jesus, of the house of David. "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" asked the magi. "Hosanna to the Son of David!" shouted the crowds when Jesus rode into Jerusalem. The prophecy was fulfilled in a way that Jeremiah and his audience could not have imagined. In a similar manner, prophecies of Jesus coming in judgement are part of our Christian faith, but we are wise not to try to say exactly how they will come to pass.

Last week I referred to the *Church Times* in my sermon, and there's a good article on today's readings in the current edition. Speaking of our current existence as a time of waiting in hope – an Advent theme – Angus Ritchie writes,

We wait for God's coming with our heads raised (Jesus' words in the gospel). And we wait because we believe the current state of the world to be neither how things are meant to be, nor how they ultimately will be. To look forward to Christ's coming in glory is to refuse to make our peace with the world as it is.

To be dissatisfied with the way things are, and maybe realise that we should be better people than we are, is an aspect of judgement. We should be inspired to change things where we can. Jesus tells us in the gospel not to be weighed down by the worries of this life. Advent, with its grand historical sweep from the yearnings of the ancient Israelite people to the judgement at the end of time, encourages us to see our lives in the light of God's purposes – to think what really matters, rather than that which is just 'of the moment'. In this we will have God's help, who is always coming into the world. To adapt S. Paul's words at the end of today's New Testament reading, he will 'so strengthen our hearts in holiness that we may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.'