

Advent and the Second Coming (KS3 and KS4)

Christians always look forward to Christmas, whatever our denominations, because it enables us to reflect once again on why we are Christians: we believe God decisively entered our world once and for all, in person, to redeem us; in so doing He had to become exactly one of us – and so begin the narratives in Matthew's and Luke's Gospels.

However, we are less confident on the period leading up to Christmas, Advent. What's it all about? Well, we know that four clear Sundays before Christmas Day (hence the moving date for Advent Sunday) we are to make spiritual preparations for the celebration of the Incarnation. Over the centuries customs have varied widely: some have Lent-like fasts, many put up Advent wreaths and lights, or share special calendars to count off the days; then there are Advent carols, Christingle, a specific wreath with five candles lit Sunday by Sunday in many churches to remember the spiritual history leading up to the arrival of Christ ('Advent' means 'arrival'), and no doubt other customs. So, what are we missing?

The Collect in the ASB prayer book for Advent includes:

...so that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to life immortal...

The original creed of Nicaea, the contemporary product in AD325 of the great Council of Nicaea states:

...[he] will come to judge the living and the dead....

And the New Testament frequently makes reference to the Second Coming, Jesus himself making reference to it in the eschatological discourse (e.g. Luke 21. 25ff), through the message of the angels at the Ascension, the epistles right up to the buffers of Revelation: *"Amen. Come Lord Jesus!"*

Why don't we make more of this profound Hope? I suggest three main reasons:

- a) Over the centuries we have seen so many 'millenarian' movements proclaiming the imminent end of the world – *'The Pursuit of the Millennium'* is a fascinating yet worrying read;
- b) Post-Enlightenment Christianity has become embarrassed to hold such a blatantly supernatural article of faith (Article IV of the 39 Articles, for example)
- c) It hasn't happened yet!

To tackle these in turn:

- a) We know even from the pages of the New Testament that an imminent Return of Christ (*Parousia*) was often expected, and that hope had to be realigned to the realities of the Christian life (2 Thessalonians 3.10, for example). Enthusiastic movements such as the 2nd Century Montanists plainly had some such expectation, and right through to the Jehovah's Witnesses today this belief has been a great inspiration, even though all predictions have proved futile. It does lead many to re-assess whether such a belief should have any place granted this history. The simple answer is 'No'; just because some people have got it wrong, the overall belief is not invalidated though it may need more careful consideration.
- b) Familiar rationalism has created liberalism, which has been a valuable antidote to modern Fundamentalism

and mindless, superstitious 'faith'; poor Anselm's *credo ut intelligam* ('believe in order that I may understand') has been misused to make blind 'faith' a virtue, which not even Jesus proposed – he told us to watch and not to let anyone deceive us, being ourselves as '*wise as serpents*'. Realised Eschatology, its roots in the Johannine tradition, took off in the 20th Century, reinterpreting 'eternal life' to mean a virtuous **quality** of life rather than an endless **quantity** of life, and of course there is much to be said for this in terms of the moral and spiritual teachings of the New Testament and of Jesus himself. Albert Schweizer's famous conclusion that Jesus was a failed eschatological prophet who flung himself to the cross trying to make God see his point of view, probably sums up the basis for redirecting the Second Coming hope towards a more spiritual and reasonable hope. But by the time the supernatural has been removed from the Gospel, Christology become Adoptionism, eternity become excellence in this world, and God merely the Ground of Our Being and not Trinity, there is not much left! Christianity is fundamentally supernatural or it is nothing.

c) For some in New Testament times the delayed Parousia was already a problem: '*Where is the promise of His coming*' (2 Peter 3.4). This could, of course, mean we have always got it wrong if doubts existed even then, but Peter's answer in this epistle is helpful: God does not work on our timescale, and if the Parousia is delayed, it is to give us time to turn to God rather than face judgement too soon, so live as if the Parousia is tomorrow, but plan to be here a long time! We sometimes call this 'Now, and not yet'. Unfortunately, there is an industry of speculation among evangelicals, often based precariously on the Book of Revelation, to construct the agenda and scheduling of the Last Days, but since Jesus himself said that only the Father knows the times, it does seem pointless to pursue the Millennium through literalism in that most troubling of books.

In conclusion, Christians must hold on to the faith of the creeds and New Testament, that this chapter, entitled 'Spacetime', will conclude and another chapter begin. It is His Story and not our history, Otherwise, to recycle St Paul, we are of all people the most to be pitied. Advent tells us there is a great Hope to be eagerly awaited, whenever it may come, and that the arrival of the Son of God in the first place, and later his resurrection, are God's promises to us that the Hope will be fulfilled: *he will come again to judge the living and the dead*. And to refer again to 2 Peter ch. 3: in the light of the Parousia, *what sort of people should we be?*

Enjoy the fun and Hope of Advent!

This resource was written by Richard Coupe, one of RE:ONLINE's Email a Believer team. If your class would like to ask a Christian representative any questions about their beliefs, or to see answers to previously asked questions please visit <http://pof.reonline.org.uk/people-of-faith/christianity/>