

Advent Sunday, 30th November 08, St Andrew's Chesterton
Isaiah 64:-9, Mk 13:24-37

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence –
²as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil –
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
⁴From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.
⁵You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
⁶We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
⁷There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
⁸Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
⁹Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity for ever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

24 'But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
25and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.
26Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory.
27Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the
ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

28 'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts
forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. 29So also, when you see these things
taking place, you know that he* is near, at the very gates. 30Truly I tell you, this
generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 31Heaven and
earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.
32 'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the
Son, but only the Father. 33Beware, keep alert;* for you do not know when the time
will come. 34It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his
slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the
watch. 35Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house

will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, 36or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. 37And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

1. Intro re Doom Painting

While I was in Vietnam, I read a novel called *Life Class* by Pat Barker. It's about some students who were at the Slade School of Art at the outbreak of the first world war. I was conscious that I was reading it at a time when people here were marking Remembrance day, which seemed quite fitting. However there is a passage which is quite fitting for Advent too. Before they go off to the front, the girl invites two of the men to visit her parents' country home. They cycle to look at a Doom painting in the local church, which has only recently been reclaimed from the limewash of centuries. The description of it made me think of ours....

'He raised his eyes to the chancel arch and saw he was in the presence of greatness. The Doom, the figure of Christ in Majesty at its centre, covered the whole arch. Below Christ's feet, St Michael held the scales. A small white naked squirming thing cowered in one pan; in the other, its sins, piled high, tilted the balance towards hell. On the left, other worm-like people hid in holes in the ground or stared up at flashes of light in the sky. the women's drooping breasts and swollen bellies retained at least the sad dignity of their function, but the men... albino tadpoles poured into the abyss. on the right, the righteous were welcomed into Heaven by angels holding robes to cover them, as if the greater part of redemption consisted of getting dressed.'

Then a dialogue occurs between the young people.

'I wonder how it happened,' Elinor said. 'Why they stopped believing the world was going to end?'

'Some people believe it now,' Tarrant said. 'There's a man marches up and down Oxford St with a placard every Saturday morning.' He deepened his voice. 'The End of the World is at Hand'.

'And everybody laughs at him,' Neville said.

'They don't actually. They don't see him.'

'There must have been a moment, mustn't there?' Neville said. 'I mean obviously not a moment, a decade, a generation, when all this punishment stuff just didn't wash any more?'

'Perhaps it was the Black Death,' Tarrant said, 'Perhaps they stopped believing it then.'

'You're explaining it away, both of you,' Elinor said. 'And you shouldn't, it's too good for that.' p.87

2. Should we bother with judgement?

Today's question for me, is how should we regard the theme of judgement? At this time of year, in Advent, we read portions of the Scriptures which look ahead to God's coming, not the incarnation but the second coming, a coming which will signal the end of this age. We still say in our liturgy – in the creed – he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead; and sometimes in the Eucharistic prayer – we long for his coming in glory, or Christ will come again **How are we supposed to approach these themes? with hope? with dread (doom)? or with a suspension of belief?** The trouble with the second coming is that it has been so long coming that

any sense of urgency has been lost. The original texts exude expectation of an imminent event but it has been 2000 years. Times are easy; we are comfortable now with this life and we are relaxed. People coming into church barely bother to scrutinise the doom painting. It's mildly interesting, not scary, or particularly relevant. Yet there are aspects of the second coming which I believe are important. **It is important because**; even if we do suspend belief in a cataclysmic end to the universe in our lifetime, **we all know that at some point our own lives on earth will end.** Incidents like the Mumbai bombings, or the twin towers, focus our minds and force us to consider our mortality.

3. What is the content of the Bible teaching about judgement?

a)The second coming passages speak of an end to this era – and of an age after that – perhaps a completely different dimension. They give us hope that even if humans completely mess up our planet, life and love will endure. This will seem more relevant at times of global anxiety, or of personal anxiety. When all around us is falling apart, we can take courage that God will enable us to go beyond what seems to be the end.

b)The second coming passages speak of meeting God face to face - an awesome prospect. The prophet Isaiah speaks of God rending the heavens and coming down – but we might be quite happy with our father in heaven, a safe distance away. Isaiah was longing for God to come closer. We may choose now to turn away from God, but these passages warn us that one day we will not have that choice.

c)The second coming passages speak of judgement – that we are accountable for what we make of this life. To me it is important that there will be a reckoning –otherwise how can the unfairness of this life be set right?

4. How should we live while waiting to meet our judge?

We need to consider how we are going to live in the light of what we are told about judgement. Jesus said 'keep alert, keep awake'. A verse from Thomas Ken's night hymn (Glory to thee my God this night 1692) has been running through my head.

**Teach me to live, that I may dread
the grave as little as my bed;
teach me to die, that so I may
rise glorious at the awful day.**

Ken asks God to teach him to live with no dread of death. Our aim is to be comfortable and relaxed if called to God's nearer presence, that the act of dying will be like settling into bed at night. To do that, we need to live consciously in the presence of God, at home or at work. That means living with integrity, without unfinished business, not putting off sorting out differences, not putting off letting people know we love them, without regrets. If any words we speak to someone were our last words, would we be satisfied with them? We need to entrust ourselves into God's hands now, confidently each day and night, whether waking or sleeping. I do not have time to elaborate now but I find the Buddhist concept of mindfulness very helpful in working out how Jesus wanted us to stay alert.

Ken asks God to teach him to die, so he may rise in glory . Perhaps as we grow older and our peer group ages and more people we know die, we start to ponder our end. At funerals we say, may she rest in peace and rise in glory. If we understand our faith then we don't have to worry about being weighed in scales, because we go to our

death trusting not in our own merits but in the mercy of God and in Christ our Saviour. If this is the case death need not be an awful day, a day we dread, a day of condemnation; but our birthday into heaven.

5. Conclusion

Our Doom painting is up there, not whitewashed over, but faint; reminding us of God's judgement. Advent is the time for us to reflect on these strands of Biblical teaching and how it affects us, living and dying.