

I was in my final year at university studying theology. It was the practise of the university chaplain to invite those who had been selected for ordained ministry training to preach at one of the regular Thursday morning Eucharists in the university chapel, and I was duly invited. One evening, a few days before I was to deliver my homily, I managed to get into an altercation with a complete stranger. It was in the back driveway behind my terraced student house where the garages were located. I had just put my old Austin Maxi away and started to walk towards the back gate of the house. It was dark, and out of nowhere, some guy whose face I never really saw clearly, suddenly barged into me. 'Hey, watch where you're going mate,' I reacted, or with words to that effect - which may have been rather less polite. I received a barrage of abusive language back from this character who was clearly the worse for drink. Unfortunately, my language back at him was equally unintelligent. The incident didn't quite turn into a punch up, but it easily could have done. We exchanged some final verbal parting shots and went our separate ways.

A little later I started to feel guilty. I was surprised and embarrassed by my reaction to this stranger in the dark. True, I had unexpectedly encountered an unpleasant individual. But I had been unpleasant too. This was, firstly, a sort of professional crisis for me. Relatively recently, I had been a Police officer in London. So what had happened to all my training and experience which should have made a silly confrontation with a lippy drunk a nothing incident for me?

My spiritual crisis was rather worse. I was a Christian. And I was heading for the ordained ministry. I began to feel that it was not just that individual in the driveway but the Lord himself who had come to me like 'a thief in the night' and found me wanting. In the darkness of that December evening and faced with the darkness apparent in someone's life, I had not shown any light. I had behaved not as a Christian should but as anyone might, and maybe a good deal worse. The one saving grace was that the lesson gave me some useful material for my Advent sermon on the coming of the Lord in judgement. In that encounter with an alcohol fuelled and foul-mouthed person, the Lord himself had caught me off my guard and made his judgement clear.

As another Advent begins, we turn our thoughts to the coming of the Lord, not just the celebration of his coming as a child at Christmas, but his future coming

in power, an event usually associated with the end of the world, at least, the world as we know it.

The first Christians, or many of them, expected the Day of the Lord, the return of Jesus in triumph and judgement to take place in their lifetimes. Of course, it did not happen, or at least, not in the way that they initially thought. Later writings in the New Testament indicate that although the Lord's coming remains a certainty, God's time frame is very different to ours. There was also an early awareness that the important coming again of the Lord had already happened. In fact, he never really left us. His continuing presence was confirmed at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came to dwell in the hearts and lives of the disciples, the Christian community. Through the Spirit, the risen Christ remains present, recognised, and received by the Christian people in our baptism and as we gather now, for the breaking of bread, the Eucharist. These sacraments also serve to remind us that there is no part of our life in which Christ is not present.

When the risen Christ came through the Spirit at Pentecost, to 'Christ-en,' to enlighten, to encourage and empower his followers, it was for a very specific reason: to commission them to take his gospel, his good news, his life and values to the whole world. For this to happen there would clearly need to be long ages of human history to come.

Although it is right that we should have a serious regard to the mysteries of the future, Christianity is not about an earth evacuation plan, certainly not a preparation for doomsday. Our biggest attention must always be for this age, this world, the present time, and the task of doing all we can, guided by the Spirit of God and the presence of the risen Lord, to help build up the kingdom of God on earth.

When we affirm and pray that Jesus will come again in glory, we are most of all making a commitment to his vision of the future, the dream of God, a time when the whole world will be 'Christ-ened.' The kingdom of God on earth for which Jesus prayed and demonstrated involves human beings with all our diversity to be living together in peace and unity, and with everyone having enough for a fulfilled and happy life. This is God's passion for the world and for human life. As Christians, as individuals and as communities of faith, this is to

be our central cause and motivation, our genuine hope for the world and its future.

So what about the final judgement? We already know what that judgement is. The life, teaching and example of Jesus inform us how we should live, how we should love, how we should behave. His judgement is with us always, as I was reminded on that dark December evening years ago, and on other occasions since then.

Our primary Advent response is that no matter how familiar we are with the Jesus story, we must enter into it more deeply so that it becomes more and more our own story, a story that makes a difference to us, and hopefully a difference that others will notice and be challenged by. The only real growth strategy or mission plan that the Church has is through Christians living authentic Christian lives, lives that genuinely reflect the love of God in Christ.

Advent calls us to prepare the way of the Lord: to pay attention, be focused, to try better and more confidently to follow the way of Christ here and now, so that the kingdom of God, which Jesus came to announce and to demonstrate, may not be confined to the realm of future hope or dream, or the heavenly life to come, but more a present living reality, one that transforms our lives now and dares us to participate with Christ in transforming the world.