
Is 2:1-5; Ps 122; Rom 13:11[8]-14; Mt 24:36-44

Unto God be the glory,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning –
the 1st Sunday of Advent,
and, as such,
the first Sunday
of the new church year –
represents an exciting –
if also challenging –
prospect.

On the one hand,
our readings
strike a note
of impending crisis –
especially on the lips
of Jesus.

We've just heard him.

*Keep awake,
for you do not know
on what day
your Lord is coming.
But understand this:
if the owner of the house
had known in what
part of the night
the thief was coming,
he would have stayed awake
and would not have let
his house be broken into.*
(Mt 24.42f.)

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By contrast –
stark contrast indeed –
the end and goal of Advent
is Christmas:
- the birth of the Prince of Peace;
- the holy family;
- the shepherds,
and the Magi;
- and the angelic
announcement:
*Be not afraid:
behold, I bring you
glad tidings of great joy,*

which shall be to all people....
(Luke 2.10)

*

How explain
this dramatic juxtaposition –
the storm clouds of Advent,
the radiant joy of Christmas?

Today's Epistle
offers some clues.

... you know the time,
writes St Paul,
that now it is high time
to awake out of sleep:
for now is our salvation
nearer than when we believed.
The night is far spent,
the day is at hand.
(Rm 13.11f.)

The word, 'advent',
means 'coming'.

The season
celebrates two comings.

Our Lord's first advent,
at Bethlehem –
his holy birth
of the Virgin Mary –
to be our saviour.

And his second advent –
his promised return
at the end of time,
when he will *judge* both
the living and the dead.
(2 Tim 4.1; 1 Pet 4.5)

We live between
those two comings –
as it were, *en route*
from the one,
to the other.

*

The problem –
as Jesus constantly

warns us –
is that we become
distracted,
forgetting
- where we've come from,
- and where we're going.

The season
and celebration
of Advent
is our alarm clock,
- to wake us up
from the slumber
of forgetfulness,
- to restore us
to our true identity –
in Christ.

The second clue
to accounting for
the stark contrast between
- the dark clouds
of judgment,
- and the angelic joy
at our Saviour's birth,
is to be found
in St Paul's description
of the difference between
- the conduct of those
who are awake
to the time,
- and those
who sleep on
in forgetfulness.

Owe no one anything,
he writes,
except to love one another....
The commandments,
You shall not commit adultery;
You shall not murder;
You shall not steal;
You shall not covet”;
and any other commandment,
are summed up in this word,
Love your neighbour as yourself.
...let us live honourably
as in the day....
(Rm 13.8f., 13)

Notice, here,
a positive
and a negative face.

The positive face first:
honour,
and love.

Those who are
awake to the time
live honourably,
and love consistently.

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Synonyms for 'honour'
are 'respect' and 'integrity',
what Jesus once called
purity of spirit –
moral, and spiritual,
transparency.
(Mt 5.3)

One's outward
appearance
and conduct
reflect, rather than disguise,
- one's inner self,
- one's heart,
- one's desires,
and attitudes.

**

As for love,
St Paul has
three things to say.

First,
...owe no one anything
but to love one another.
(Rm 13.8)

Christians are to have
no outstanding debts,
no unfulfilled obligations,
except that of love.

The debt of love
(unlike other debts

which we can pay up fully
and be done with) –
is unlimited:
we can never be done
with discharging it.

*

The second thing
St Paul says about love
is this:
*Love does no wrong
to one's neighbour.*
(Rm 13.10)

C. S. Lewis liked to say
that we don't have to
like our neighbour.

She or he may be
quite uncongenial to us,
may indeed, have hurt,
or offended us
in some way.

But, however un-likable...,
we are not relieved
of our responsibility
to work no ill,
to *do no wrong*,
to them.
(Rm 13.10)

*

Which leads nicely
into St Paul's third point
about love –
a direct quotation
from the Old Testament,
quoted several times
by Jesus:
Love your neighbour as yourself.
(Rm 13.9)

Notice –
not, 'instead of yourself',
but, as yourself.

Self-love comes naturally
and automatically –
not, necessarily
self-approval,
or self-liking –

but self-love.

Self-loathing is pathological.

In the normal course of events
we look after ourselves,
and go to great lengths
to protect and care
for ourselves.

God's commandment
claims the same priority
for neighbour-love.

Love of our neighbour
is to be
“...as real and sincere”
as our self-love!
(Cranfield, *Romans*, 677)

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Jesus famously warned
against a narrow
interpretation
of ‘neighbour’
in the parable
of the good Samaritan.

It's not sufficient
- to love an-other,
- some-one other than ourselves –
- one of our own,
- or one whom we are
naturally drawn to –
whom it's easy to love.

Rather...,
we're to love
each one who comes
our way,
whom God
brings to us
as our neighbour.

And we're to love them
in word and deed,
as someone whom
we can affect
through good times
and bad.

I said that
St Paul's description
of the conduct of those
who are awake,
alive, to God
has a positive
and a negative face.

This last description –
of love doing no wrong
to the neighbour –
brings us nicely
to the negative face –
what love is not!

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*Love, Paul says,
is the fulfilling of the law.*

By way of example,
he lists 4 of the
10 Commandments –
all of them
in the negative mode.

What is...
the *ill*, the *wrong*,
that love does not do
to the neighbour?

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Love does *not* commit adultery.

Love honours
one's own spouse
by being faithful.

Love honours
other's marriages
by respecting
and supporting
their mutual faithfulness.

Adulterous love –
however intense,
and passionate,
and self-justifying –
is not love.

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Love does *no murder*.

The 4th Century Briton,
Pelagius, is helpful here
(and I quote):
“If one sees that one’s neighbour
is in danger of starvation,
does one not murder them if –
while one has an abundance –
one doesn’t give them food,
though one hasn’t
used up one’s own
provisions?
“Anyone who is able
to help someone
close to death,
in whatever situation of need,
kills that person
if they do not
come to their aid”
(end quote).
(ACCS, Romans 13.11)

*

Love does *not steal*;
love does *not slander*,
bear false witness,
or gossip.

Love does *not covet*
or *envy* a neighbour’s
- goods,
- family,
- prestige,
- or achievements.

And so..., we have
our second clue
to the peculiar juxtaposition
of Advent joy,
and foreboding –
- a ‘yes’ to love of neighbour;
- a ‘no’ to lawlessness
and self-interest.

Advent anticipates,
and celebrates
the birth of the Lord of love –
born that the loveless

might become lovely;
that our self-love
might be transformed
by his love
into a generous
and compassionate
love for one another –
friend and stranger
alike.

Our advent joy
is the joy of those
who've been set free
by the Christmas gospel
- from self-interest
at the expense
of our neighbours,
- to love of our neighbours.

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Advent's note of foreboding
is the clarion call –
the inescapable warning –
that the loveless,
the disobedient,
and the merciless,
will have no place
in the coming
kingdom of God,
but only the fearful prospect
of God's stern judgment.

So, *wake up!*
(Rv 3.2f.)

Rediscover
- that proper sense
of eagerness
and urgency,
- that active, and resolute
engagement with the tasks
of faith, and obedience
and love,
so that you may celebrate
with great joy
our Lord's first advent
at Bethlehem,
and anticipate,
without fear,
his second advent
in the new Jerusalem.

My last word
is St Paul's
urgent exhortation:
*...it is now the moment
for [us] to wake from sleep.
...the night is far gone,
the day is near.*
*Let us then lay aside
the works of darkness,
and put on ... the Lord Jesus Christ –*
(Rm 13.11f., 14)
to whom be all honour, glory,
dominion, and praise.
Amen