

Advent Sunday

29 11 09

Almighty God,
give us grace to cast away the works of darkness
and to put on the armour of light
so that on the last day when your Son, Jesus Christ,
will come to judge the living and the dead,
we may rise to life immortal.

My text may be found in today's Psalm:

'To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; my God, I put my trust in you

Psalm 25 v1

In the last ten days, in the Lake District in Cumbria, we have experienced exceptional weather conditions; in the cinema at Dinard, you might have seen '2012', the latest disaster movie to predict the end of the world as we know it; and at my flat in Dinard, I received my first visit in France from Les Témoins de Jehovah. Given today is Advent Sunday, these three separate events assumed a group significance which caught my attention.

As you know, Advent Sunday, like the Roman god, Janus, looks simultaneously in two opposite directions. Advent Sunday not only looks back; it is also looking forward. We are all, I hope, looking forward to Christmas when it comes next month. But strictly speaking, though we are looking forward to Christmas Eve, to

Christmas Day itself, we are, in fact, looking back to a most significant event in history that happened some 2,000 years ago – the birth of Jesus Christ. As such, we may be looking forward to an event that has already happened in the past but Advent also encourages us to look forward to an event that has yet to happen: the end times and with them, the Second Coming of Christ.

What the extraordinary weather in Cumbria has produced is real hardship for some people as their lives are seriously disrupted by the consequent flooding. Rain and the Lake District are synonymous. I've spent several holidays in the past based in Keswick hill-walking and I know how prone the area is to rain. But what we have seen is an exceptional volume of water falling in a short space of time which has run down from the hills to swell streams to bursting point, to make rivers of roads, lakes of towns and to sweep away bridges that have stood for centuries. It is truly awful and must seem like the end of the world to those folk whose homes are ruined by the all-pervading water which is a real attraction of the area.

The film '2012' is a 'silly' modern disaster movie inspired purportedly by the Mayan prophecy that the world will come to an end in the year 2012. Since the Mayan world ended a lot earlier for them with the coming of the Spanish Conquistadors and their calendar so very different from our Christo-centric, European calendar, 2012 as such could have held little significance in Mayan culture. But the film, 'fantastic' in the worst sense of the word, is just one more in a long line of dramatic predictions that the world as we know is time-limited and that we are fast-approaching our sell-by date!

Les Témoins de Jehovah or Jehovah Witnesses also specialise in predicting the end of the world as we know it. That Armageddon, the final conflict, will bring about the end has featured regularly in their world-view which has unsuccessfully identified successive events from the First World War to the Second Millennium, as the start of the end. A nineteenth century American cult, Les Témoins de Jehovah scare people with the prospect of the end of the world in order to encourage them to join the comfort zone of being among the limited number of folk who are destined to be saved.

It is not that the end of the world will not eventually come: we all know it will. We know individually that we only have so much time to live; we know that our body eventually will deteriorate and fail; we know that our spirit will grow weary and will seek for rest; we know that our minds become enfeebled over time: all of this is what it is to be mortal. But we also know, instinctively, that the planet on which we live cannot last forever however small our carbon footprint may now be with the new energy saving bulbs we are now forced to buy at extraordinary prices. It is the end times to which Advent Sunday looks forward. That great Advent hymn, 'Lo he comes with clouds descending' pictures just such a time and the opening verse of our gospel from St Luke in typical apocalyptic, language depicts as much when he predicts, 'There will be signs in the sun the moon and the stars, and on the earth distress among the nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.' (21 v25) What is particular to a Christian view of the end times is an acceptance that no one knows when it will be. We may feel that we are living in such times but we can't know. Instead we should live our lives as if we are living in the last days so that there is a real sense of just how precious our time is; that

we do in fact only have a finite time to make a difference: to love God and to love our neighbour as we should be loving ourselves.

So with the prospect of the end times being a present reality, I absolutely refuse to be gloomy, 'maussade' as the French might describe the weather in late November. Christianity has a really positive world-view in which we all have the potential and the possibility of being Children of God, Les Enfants de Dieu bien aimés, and of enjoying a living and loving relationship with him. That is why I am happy to make the words of the psalmist today my own:

'To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; my God, I put my trust in you

Why don't you too?

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

29th November, 2009

H: Sermon 21: Advent Sunday

