

Advent Change

5 12 10

O Lord,
raise up, we pray, your power and come among us,
and with great might succour us;
that whereas, through our sins and wickedness,
we are grievously hindered in running the race set before us,
your bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord.

My text may be found in Paul's letter to the Romans chapter 15 and verses 8 & 9:
'For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the
truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs,
and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercies.'

The Revd Dr John Marvell spoke last week of change and change is certainly a
theme of Advent. Advent looks back to change in the past, and looks forward to
change in the future, and encourages change in the present.

Change in the past came with the coming of John the Baptist. He 'appeared' in
the wilderness of Judea and people flocked to him. He didn't appear out of
nowhere: his father was Zechariah, a priest, and his mother was Elizabeth, cousin
to Jesus' mother Mary. He was a child of their old age, a special boy who was
destined according to his father's prophetic words to be:

'the prophet of the Most High
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.' (Luke 1 v76 & 77)

John looked like what he was – an Old Testament prophet. His clothes were made of camel hair and he wore a leather belt round his waist. His diet was similarly austere: he ate locusts and wild honey. Here was an ascetic, a wild man from the desolate hill country, whose eyes were on fire with the presence of God in his life. And his message was uncomfortable, challenging: 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' He is urging people to change. He encourages them to look at themselves, who they are and what they do and to turn away from their wrong-doing. Repent is a technical, theological word. It means to be conscious, fully aware of where we have fallen short of what we ought to be and of what we ought to do. And John did not mince his words or spare his hearers and his message is uncompromising: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?' Yet the people were moved by him to change, they responded to his warning that times were about to change, that the long-expected Messiah was about to come, that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. And their response was vividly illustrated by the witness of their baptism in the Jordan by John, by being ritually cleansed of their sin and having washed away

their spiritual dirt, by being ready to begin afresh.

John the Baptist was playing out the role of Elijah predicted by the prophet Isaiah who announced the coming of the Messiah. And it is the coming of the Messiah that Advent is looking forward to, not only in the sense that Advent prepares us for Christmas and the birth of Jesus, a sort of future in the past, but in another sense, it is looking forward to the Second Coming, embodied in my favourite Advent hymn, 'Lo he comes in clouds descending'. Christmas is still twenty days off and there is still much to do before I'm ready to relax over a Christmas meal. But the Second Coming is at an unspecified time in the future, an uncertain time when change will be radical and the old order will be replaced by the new and the Kingdom of Heaven will be fully realised. But unfortunately, the best and wisest among us know not how soon.

So Advent is about change in the past and change in the future But it can also be about change in the present as we move forward ourselves and change and develop into the people God has intended us to be. Change may not be comfortable; change may not be what we want but change is a part of what it means to be alive in a dynamic changing world of growth and decay. The change that Jesus brought was the message of universal salvation, not only the promise to his Chosen People, the Jews, but also to the Gentiles. It was the vision of a

universal God of Love who loves all his creation, all his people and that is what Paul clearly saw and wrote about in my text from Romans today: 'For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercies.'

So let us not be afraid of change in the past, in the future or at the present time. Instead let us welcome a dynamic, living relationship with our Saviour, Jesus Christ, which gives us the energy and motive to change.

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

5th December, 2010

H: Sermon 23: Advent Change

