

Advent

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Almighty God,
give us grace to cast away the works of darkness
and to put on the armour of light,
now in the time of this mortal life
in which your Son Jesus Christ
came to us in great humility;
that on the last day
when he will come again in glorious majesty
to judge the living and the dead,
we may rise to the life immortal.

Our text this morning can be found in Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians chapter 3 and verse 13:

'be blameless before our God and Father
at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.'

Last Sunday, we ended the Christian Year with Christ the King; today, we begin the Christian Year with Advent Sunday. Last week reminds us that ultimately Jesus Christ is Lord; today reminds us that one day Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead. The when and the how of the Second Coming are mysteries beyond our knowledge but it is an article of our faith that one day all things will come to an end – though the best and wisest of us know not how soon. So

instead of concentrating on something we can't possibly know, let's focus this morning on something we can usefully consider: how we might stand **blameless** before God at the last.

A fortnight ago, I was given an article in the Global Edition of the New York Times for Wednesday 14th November. In it, Erica Brown, a Jewish scholar, wrote the following:

Thomas Arnold Kemp was executed this past April through lethal injection. He stole \$200 from a college student in Tucson in 1992 and then murdered him. It took seven minutes for him to die. His last words: "I regret nothing." Really? Regret incites us to review and reflect on our actions; when we miss the mark, regret generates disappointment and grief. Regret would not have kept Mr. Kemp alive. But it might have kept him decent

Christianity as you know has its roots in Judaism and I think Erica Brown's insight into the nature of regret can help us to clarify our text today: how we might **be blameless before our God**.

If we're honest, we all know we get things wrong. Not to have made mistakes on a daily basis is just not possible. Part of what it is to be human is the certainty that we will all get things wrong and sometimes what we get wrong and what we do wrong can be a real source of heartache for ourselves and those we wrong. The phrase Erica Brown uses is 'miss the mark' and that is precisely the meaning of sin, of wrong-doing: it is the arrow that is aimed at a target that fails to hit the

mark, falling short of that at which it is aimed. Okay, so if we fall short of the mark, then what should we do ? Regret: to feel sorrow and sadness, disappointment and grief that we did not do that which we ought to have done and that we are truly sorry. Now that is what we call repentance: to be sorry, truly sorry, we've got it wrong and to want to try to be better in the future.

The great thing about Christianity is the recognition that 'All have sinned and fallen short'; the great thing about Christianity is the possibility of being forgiven for what we have done wrong provided we are genuinely sorry. For me, one of the most powerful and encouraging images in the Bible is the moment the father hugs the prodigal son on his return home. The boy was sorry for being such a fool; he genuinely regrets his behaviour; his coming back home shouts to me that he regrets what he has done. The fact his father embraces him, gives him decent clothes to wear, sandals for his feet and a ring for his finger all point to the fact the boy is forgiven. And so too can we.

Thomas Arnold Kemp could not bring himself to say sorry for having murdered a college student. He said, 'I regret nothing'. Had he genuinely been sorry for what he had done wrong, then according to Erica Brown, he would at least have died 'decent'. 'Decent' is an interesting word to use here to describe a convicted murderer. Decent usually means someone who's okay, a good bloke, properly dressed, fit-for-purpose, up-to-scratch. In Jewish terms, it might mean, kosher, clean. In Christian terms, I wonder in this context whether decent might suggest being forgiven by God, washed clean by the blood of the Lamb and despite his grave wrong-doings, that even a murderer could stand 'blameless' in the sight of

God. If only Kemp had been able to regret what he'd done in robbing a young student of his life, then the truth may have set him free. Sadly Kemp died unrepentant, regretting nothing – poor soul !

It is because we can repent of our sins, regret what we do wrong that by the grace of God and our belief in Christ as our Lord and Saviour that will allow us to stand **blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.'**

May that be true for all of us, I pray.

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

2nd December, 2012

G: Sermon 27 : Advent

