

**Advent Sunday
29 November 2009**

**Church of the Ascension, Hilton
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**Advent Readings:
Jeremiah 33: 14 – 16
Psalm 25: 1 – 10
Thessalonians 3: 9 – 13
Luke 21: 25 - 36**

Service introduction

Welcome to this place where young ones and older ones can sit side by side, where heaven and earth embrace, where God has been, is and always will be. God is here – and we are here to worship Him, to greet the Lord in prayer, praise and song!

The Lord be with you!

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**Theme**

The future may be unknown, but we can face it confidently because we know that the One who holds the future loves us and can be trusted.

**Sermon**

Always at the beginning of Advent, the Bible readings set for the day bring us images of the coming end of the world as we know it and the establishment of the eternal reign of Jesus Christ; that has also been part of the themes of the last two weeks, considering God as Judge and Christ as King.

There is evocative language (“apocalyptic”) in which we read of the moon dripping with blood, stars falling from the sky, and the Son of Man riding in on a cloud with power and great glory. And every year when faced with that, some of us preachers cringe a bit, and wonder what we can say about it all that could be helpful.

From time to time, there are crazy speculations about the end of the world. There was a special rush of people to predict such things at this time ten years ago, as 1999 was about to turn into the New Millennium of the Year 2000 – remember all that hype?

For some reason, some people who make these confident predictions about such things think that these events will start at the beginning of a new calendar millennium.

I suppose at one level, it makes sense: One thousand years after Christ. Two thousand years after Christ. A new thousand is about to start. But you don't have to study it very hard before cracks appear in the theory. For instance, Jesus stated so clearly that it would happen at an unexpected time when no one was looking for it, so he unlikely to start it all off on his two thousandth birthday!

Even so, as historians and newspaper articles remind us every year about this time as the celebration of Jesus' birth comes around again, mistakes were made in re-working the calendar years esp. when they changed from the Julian to the Gregorian Calendar. The result is that Jesus was not born in Year 1 AD, but most probably in 4 BC.

Or perhaps we should be looking out for the two thousandth anniversary of the crucifixion, in which case millennial fever is still to come. The more you think about it the sillier it looks.

So what do we need to know about "The Last Things", as Scriptures call it, using the Greek word "Eschaton", the grand finale of all time?

If I understand what the Biblical writings on the subject are telling us, there seem to be only two things we definitely need to know:

First, it is all in the hands of Jesus Christ. Second, there aren't any more things you can know for sure about it. That's it, plain and simple.

You don't need to know when it's going to be. Jesus said he didn't know himself. You need to live your life so that you'll be found living faithfully when the day comes. Jesus warns, towards the end of the passage, against living life in wastedness, weighed down by the worries of this life, for that day could catch you unexpectedly like a trap.

If you are trying to live in tune with of God's Spirit and the day comes, you will be found strong of heart, healthy of mind, full of life, just as you were created to be. If not you could be found wasted, shallow and listless, having squandered the life you were given.

If you are living life as a gift, gratefully received, you will be found full of integrity, free of greed, anxiety or compulsion. If not you are more likely to be found weighed down by the cares of this world, preoccupied with climbing to your next promotion, finding the right accessories to go with your new suit, or getting the stain out of the upholstery in your car.

No, you don't need to know when the end is coming. Whether it is tomorrow or in a thousand years, live today consciously, honestly, simply, mercifully, and in gratitude for the love you have been given in Christ.

The craving to know the details comes partly from curiosity, but mostly from insecurity. Having seen many dreams shattered and hopes come to nothing, we long for confidence about what the future will hold. We want to see the details in advance to inoculate ourselves against further hurts and disappointments. So why does God withhold them from us? It seems a reasonable enough desire. Well, although we might not get the details, God does not withhold grounds for confidence.

All that we need for confidence in the future is to know the One who holds the future in his hands. Think about it for a moment. Picture the people who turn up at Durban Harbour for one of those "mystery cruises" for 3 or 4 nights, going "nowhere in particular". There is a great deal of uncertainty about their immediate futures. They are about to get into a large floating steel hotel, cruise towards the middle of the deep blue sea, and end up who knows where.

But do they lack confidence in the future? Not at all! They are excited and expectant, confident that they are going to have a good time. The uncertainty about the destination is part of the fun and they have no fear because they trust that the people who organise these things can operate cruise ships safely and are not going to drop them off in the middle of the Indian Ocean halfway to Australia or leave them in a dinghy 5 days' rowing distance away from Southern Madagascar and tell them to find their own way home.

But it would be very different if the mystery was, who's going to pilot the ship? If you knew that part of the mystery was that there was only a fifty percent chance that a qualified captain would actually be on the ship and even then only a thirty percent chance that she'd actually be on the bridge, as they call it, directing the ship, how many of you would be willing to turn up for a mystery cruise then?

The gospel is not good news because it predicts a bright shiny future where all the details are secured in advance and nothing can alter them. The gospel is good news because it promises that the future is in the hands of Jesus Christ, because it promises a future based on the faithfulness of God.

In Jesus Christ we have seen the human face of God. We have seen the human God who will embrace us when we thought we were untouchable. We have seen the human God who will heal us when we had given up hope. We have seen the human God who will soften our hearts when we had lost faith in our own ability to love. We have seen the human God who will point out pathways of peace and reconciliation. We have seen the human God who will not let even death have the last say, but breaks free of its clutches, blazing a trail on which all may follow from tragedy to newness of life, full of love and hope.

When we hear in the Bible that we will see the Son of Man descending on a thunderous cloud with power and great glory, it need not sound like a threatening image to us, because we are the ones who know that the One who comes is the One who has blessed the earth in the past. This glorious all-powerful "Son of Man" is also known as "The Suffering Servant", the one who went to the cross for us.

That is why we are able to live today with confidence and not fear. Not because we know what tomorrow will look like, but because we know that, in Jesus Christ, God does not give up on the world. Because we know that there is nothing that can happen to us that can separate us from the love of God and nothing that we can do that is beyond the reach of God's mercy.

Having come to us as Jesus of Nazareth, God promises to come among us as the great Son of Man, seated on clouds to rule the world. The one who comes on the clouds, that strange, powerful, cosmic Christ has a face that is none other than the face we saw on a baby at Bethlehem.

We do not know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future. We have a future, and it belongs to Christ.

*[I am indebted to input from Nathan Nettleton – notes for a sermon on similar topic]*

**Eucharistic Preface**

[Introductory words from Prayer Book, followed by...]

We do indeed give you our thanks and praise, O God,  
for even when the whole earth is thrown into chaos  
your tenderness and lasting love are our sure hope.

You created the heavens and the earth,  
and though even they will pass away,  
the words you have spoken to us  
are an everlasting covenant of promise.

The words of your son, Jesus Christ,  
shook the earth and opened our eyes to your coming reign.  
He led us in the paths of your truth  
and taught us your ways of faithful love.

When he humbled himself to come among us as a man,  
he fulfilled the plan you formed long ago  
and opened for us the way to salvation.

Now we watch for the day,  
hoping that the salvation promised us will be ours  
when Christ our Lord will come again in his glory.

**Blessing and Dismissal**

You believe that the Son of God once came to us;  
you look for him to come again.

May God make you steadfast in faith,  
joyful in hope, and untiring in love  
all the days of your life

and the blessing of God almighty ...