

SO WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT, THEN?

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 7th December 2003

Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 126; Phillipians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6.

Do you have a philosophy of life?

That may sound too heavy a question to ask early on Sunday morning, but I ask again: Do you have a philosophy of life?

It may be a sophisticated jargon-filled life-purpose statement, it may consist of a few simple thoughts, or it may be tucked away unconsciously in the recesses of your life, guiding how you live even if you're not particularly aware of it every day.

It may even be like something expressed in several bumper stickers recently seen at the Mall. One read: "Born to Shop!" Now there's a statement for a person who believes that shopping is what life is all about and that a good spend will cure any ailment – what is light heartedly termed "retail therapy". Or this classic – if you'll excuse the language – "Life's a bitch – then you die!" How's that for an expression of bad vibes and cynicism?

I believe that today's Bible readings centre us on purposes of living. They also centre us in this Season we call Advent – a label ascribed by the Church through many centuries to a season intended to reflect God-designed purposes in creation.

These purposes are not given in an individualistic sense but in a big-picture sense – an overall purpose for living for all of humanity together with God. Individuality comes into it in this way: Every person somehow determines whether they want to be in alignment to that or in disharmony with it.

We may have varying understandings and expressions of how we see ourselves fitting into it. Nevertheless, I suspect there are many points the Christian would find in common with other Christians, if we talked it all through; despite our different personalities and different "brands" of Christianity, the elements of this purpose would probably include the following:

- Knowing that we are created by a loving God
- Created for relationship with God
- Designed for community (mixtures of independence & interdependence), not for solitary existence
- Intended to respond to God's offer of relationship / assurance of salvation...
- ... As made known by Jesus Christ, and experienced primarily through him
- And to enjoy this relationship with God forever.

I would also suggest that we know life is best lived, not when lived aimlessly, but when lived...

- In knowledge of these things

- When lived in a relationship with God – freely chosen by us, even though it has been initiated by God
- Knowing that our ultimate reality and destiny is greater than our physical, mental and even spiritual existence on earth, but is to enjoy the fullness of knowing God outside the bounds of time and physical creation.

That is what roots people in fulfilment, no matter their circumstances or surroundings; the fulfilment arises out of acknowledging that for which God has created us. It brings to mind the often-quoted words of St. Augustine: God has made us for himself, and we are restless until we find our peace in God; he elaborated that it was as if there was a God-shaped space within each of us, and true peace is never found until that space is filled by God, instead of all the other things we try to fill that space with.

So what makes Advent a central part of these themes?

The word means “Coming”, as you have often heard / been reminded – in reference to Jesus’ having come to make God’s purposes more fully known than previously done through the prophets, to declare the intentions of God and to make known God’s promised restoration of humanity as originally intended. It also refers to the promised coming of Christ at the end of time as we know it – a point in history neither knowable nor predictable, but which will come just as surely as Christ’s first predicted appearance occurred several centuries after it was first prophesied by God’s servants, speaking under the power of God’s Spirit!

Advent is therefore about far more than only preparing for Christmas, as important and as consuming a task as that may seem – even as tedious a task that may seem, if hunting Christmas turkeys and gathering Christmas gifts is rather stressful for you!

Advent is about reminding the people of God, and all who are prepared to hear it, that the day-to-day tasks and challenges and joys and frustrations of life which at times thrill us and at times drain us, are NOT the sole reality to living. There IS life out there – not meant in the sense of aliens-in-a-UFO, but in the sense of reality in God.

This is far larger and more beautiful and more joy-filled than anything we can imagine. It one that we ought to have a glimmer of – Jesus consistently gave us a glimmer of it – so that our lives now may be lived in the light of what is yet to be revealed. The whole of Scripture points in varying ways and with varying intensities to that larger, fuller picture of reality. That would suggest a framework for any philosophy of life we hold to, an understanding of life lived in the light of the bigger picture God has given us.

As we take a brief look at our scripture readings for today, aspects of that stand out: (major points highlighted)

Malachi 3: 1-4

- Messenger who will come to prepare the way
- “Who can endure the day of his coming?”
- “Who can stand when he appears?”

- Words recited in Handel's Messiah – wonderful Advent music (captures themes of Christ's first and second comings), and the understanding that, as intimate and friendly as we are called on to address God our Father ("Abba" = Dad), on the day when Christ comes again / we stand before God on Judgement Day, we shall fall in awe, rather stand around casually and say "Hi Dad!"
- God as the refiner and purifier, with a promised restoration of things as they were meant to be.

Psalm 126

- "Hallel Psalms of Ascent" said by the devout Jew on approach to Jerusalem – also carrying with it a sense of God's restoration of things, and of the promise of God's salvation, yet to be fully experienced
- The Lord has done great things; those who have sown (even) in a time of tears, will reap in joy.

Phil. 1: 3-11

- (Not major focus) refers also to "the day of Christ": (and a harvest of righteousness)

Luke 3: 1-6

- John the messenger to prepare...
- Baptism as a sign of repentance for sins
- Again, words of Isaiah (also much used in Handel): "All flesh shall see the salvation of our God!" (Expand)

I close by using some words (not my own), words of prose with a slightly adapted preamble:

(Days of the Lord – the Liturgical Year – ed. Order of St. Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota, pp. 86-87.)

The angel said to Mary that his 'reign will be without end' (Luke 1:3), which suggests another coming of the Son of the Most High upon this earth. This is completely in line with what the prophets had announced (as heard in our first reading and other readings of the prophets). This is why (in our NT reading) Paul can say that we march toward the day when we will be 'found rich in the harvest of justice which Jesus Christ has ripened in you, to the glory and praise of God'.

Like the first coming of the Lord, the second must be prepared personally in the community of believers, by (faithfulness) to the will of God and the active reception of his grace. God who has begun in us his work asks only that it be followed to its end: 'up to the day of Christ Jesus'.

Actually there are still many mountains and hills, many valleys that are obstacles on the road to peace and justice ... many divisions between men and women and the scattered faithful. There are also many who have not seen the salvation of God! For

all that, Advent is a time of hope and joy, of confidence as expressed in the prayer:
'Our Father ... your kingdom come!'

It moves us toward the approaching celebration of the Nativity of the Lord, which is not a simple commemoration of his first coming long ago, but an ... announcement and guarantee of what is already on the horizon.

Leave your sorrow and tears,
Put on your garments of joy:
The one who is coming
Comes on the clouds!

The love of God guides us;
His glory is our light:
The one who is coming
Comes victorious!

Why do you not hasten
Toward the day of your God?
The one who is coming
Comes for our joy!

Prepare his way,
Accept his pardon;
Each of us will see the grace of our God
On the day of judgement!

Happy the one who believed
That one day would be fulfilled
The words of our God
For all whom he loves!

Behold the times are come, when the Lord of justice will fulfil his promise of peace
For all whom he loves!