

Advent Sunday 2008

Isaiah 64.1-9; Matthew 13.24-end

The Liquid Lake of Fire

Thinking back to my Canadian home town, Edmonton, in the province of Alberta, I can remember one cold January in 1968. I was driving along a very icy street, trying to keep my car on a straight line, when I saw a sign outside a local church. This church was known for its fire and brimstone preaching. On this particular morning the sign read: *Repent now, or dwell forever in the liquid lake of fire. Repent now, or dwell forever in the liquid lake of fire.*

That sign was making reference to something in the Book of Revelation, where St John the Divine has a revelation of the end of all things; of the last judgement where the saints are separated from the sinners, and the sinners are cast into that liquid lake of fire. Now there's a cheerful thought, I said to myself as I drove by the sign. And then the naughty part of me thought (I was only eighteen at the time) that I wouldn't mind that liquid lake of fire, because it was so cold. We were near the end of a record cold spell where the temperature had not been above -16 degrees for nearly a month, and most of the time it had been around -25 to -30. I could do with some warmth from that 'liquid lake of fire'.

Another time, in summer, that church put up a sign that simply said: *Jesus saves*. But the Safeway supermarket a block down the road has its own sign up: *Safeway saves you more*. The local press picked this up in side-by-side photographs, which led the pastor of that church to get angry and to launch into another fire and brimstone sermon on local radio.

Repentance and Salvation

Repent now; Jesus saves. Actually these are two very good themes for us to be taking to heart in this Advent season that we begin today. Advent, as a word, comes from two Latin words: *ad venio*. Roughly, that translates as 'towards the coming'. This is the season when we look forward towards the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Originally, this was about the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ as King and Judge over all things at the end of time itself. But as Christmas has started to happen earlier and earlier, both sacred Christmas and secular Christmas, the emphasis has tended to shift towards the coming the word-made-flesh, the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem.

Just for a short time, though, before we are overwhelmed with Christmas, I hope we can think about the older meaning of Advent; the meaning where we look towards the end of things and our Lord Jesus Christ as our judge. In our Old Testament reading this morning, we heard a prayer by the prophet Isaiah that the God will come and exercise his judgement:

O that thou wouldst rend the heaven and come down, that the mountains might quake at thy presence – as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil- to make thy name known to thy adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at thy presence.....

The Potter

The prophet is calling for God to judge the world, and even his own people. Its language and its imagery are quite scary. But that reading ends on a different note, a note of consolation, mercy and love. Isaiah's prayer says this:

*Yet, Lord, thou art our Father; we are the clay, and thou art our potter;
we are all the work of thy hand.*

For me, that is a wonderful image. We are the clay in the hands our God, our maker, and so long as we let him, he will mould us into all he wants us to be. But it needs our consent, our cooperation; and that is what lies at the heart of that word 'Repent'.

Positive Repentance

Too often, to repent is just seen negatively, as being about confessing our sins to God and receiving his forgiveness. That is part of repentance, but not all, and it is the part that that fire-and brimstone preacher in Canada was on about. But there is so much more to repentance than that! Again if we look at the Latin word from which repent comes from, it is so much more about turning around, facing the other way, making a new beginning. Specifically, for us, it means turning around to face the God who loves us, instead of hiding from him or ignoring him. It means saying to that potter, yes, in sorrow for our sins, but also in hope for what will be, *melt me, mould me, fill me, use me*. Repentance means surrendering our lives again to the living God who will make us anew. And that making new is done through Jesus, who does indeed come to save, to heal, to make whole, to make us a new creature from the moment of our baptism into his risen life.

So then, we have two things to take to heart this morning, first, that the Saviour comes. Second that we are called to renew the life-long work of our repentance. That language of 'the liquid lake of fire' may be melodramatic and scary, but does give a picture of the lostness, the emptiness, the meaninglessness, that awaits those who reject God. But thanks be to God that in Jesus Christ his Son, he gives us the way of being saved, the way in which his loving forgiveness awaits even our most tentative repentance turning to him.

The Advent Wreath

We lit the first candle on the Advent wreath this morning to remind us of the Lord who is coming to us as our Saviour. The candles, as we light them through Advent, will remind us of the steps there were in God's plan to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus. The Advent Wreath, the candles, and the prayers that go with them remind us of how God reached out to us; and they should encourage us to repent, to turn and move towards him.

Let's say again together the prayer in bold print that begins on the bottom of the first of your service sheet.

**God of Abraham and Sarah,
and all the Patriarchs of old,
you are our Father too.
Your love is revealed to us in Jesus Christ,
Son of God, and Son of David.
Help us in preparing to celebrate his birth,
to make our hearts ready
and to place our hope in you.
Help us today and every day**

**to worship you, to hear your word,
and to do your will by sharing your hope with others.
We ask it in the name of the one who was born in Bethlehem.**

Amen.