

The First Sunday of Advent, year C

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Introduction

In liturgical terms, we are starting the new year. The first Sunday of Advent is the first Sunday of the new liturgical year. We are beginning Year C -- a year that takes many readings from the gospel of Luke. As we begin this, we wish to say two things:

Firstly – thank you for your feedback on this resource. We will take your thoughts and words to heart, with deep gratitude.

Secondly – we'd like to invite you to join us on Zoom on the four Sundays of Advent at 5.30pm Irish time (that's 12.30pm Eastern time) for conversations about the [Spirituality of Conflict](#) book with four of the writers from the project. Registration is required, and is – of course – free. [You can register here.](#)

The Advent gospel readings are often calls to serious reflection on justice, lifestyle and action. In this selection, we are hearing the words of Jesus in Jerusalem, nearing the time of his crucifixion. The widow has just put her mite in the collection box, Jesus has been irked by the ways she's been manipulated into giving all while those with plenty are giving little. And he begins to speak – words of apocalypse.

Apocalypse, as has been mentioned many times in this resource, is not a foretelling of the future (even though it might sometimes sound like that). Apocalypse is a word from the theatre: the pulling back of the curtain. Apocalypse reveals what is happening right now, it shows where the concern of God is directed in the present moment, and the call is always to see, respond, act, change and live in a new way. Advent, that season of preparation before the joyous celebration at Christmas, is not a gentle journey. Advent asks for important reckonings about the states of our world.

Text

Luke 21: 25–36

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint

from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Comment

This week’s reading from Luke has often been used to speak about the End Times. Depending as to one’s tradition, there are different ways that the End Times have been discussed. Certainly, in the first hundred years of the young Christian communities, it was thought that Jesus would return imminently. When he didn’t, a crisis emerged, and people had to re-examine their theologies of death, and being on the earth, and living.

In the past 100 years, there has been the increase – in some Western Christianities – in the imagination that Jesus will return at some point in the future, leading to dramatic show-downs.

Both of these imaginations take a particularly linear view of time.

However, this is only one understanding of time.

In much literature, imagination, and in many cultures around the world, it is understood that time moves in multiple ways, one of which is in a circle. Taken this way, the proposal is that the End Times are always with us, and that communities who heed the gospel should also heed the world. They should be attentive to the signs of their century, the events happening in the here-and-now, and rather than using their faith to abscond or abdicate from such events, should be motivated to engage because of their faith.

The lectionary gospel text for this week demonstrates signs by how they’ll be made visible in the world: looking at distress on the earth among nations, roaring of the sea, waves, foreboding, gathering clouds, and the sun. Is this a description from the gospels? Or is it a description of our world in 2021 groaning under climate change? Yes. And yes.

How many more signs do we need to see? Jesus was alert to the crisis of his century: how to have a practice of faith that knew how to act under the ache of empire and Roman dominance. The text calls us to many things today: enactment of justice in light of racial and gender discrimination; enactment of new lifestyles under the ache of climate emergencies; reform of government and corporate imaginations and their taxations and resource-usage as the planet groans for sustainability.

Be on your guard, Jesus warns. It will come upon all who live on the face of the

whole earth. Yes. And yes.

In the face of enormity, it can be hard to know how to act. Recycling your milk cartons is all well and good, but unless mass scale changes happen in energy industries, transportation, manufacturing and food, our recycled milk cartons won't do enough. However, enough individuals acting together to hold corporations, industries and governments to account and to pressure for mass-scale change, achievable reformation of their plastic usage, carbon-output and taxation means that the signs of the times can be understood as *signs*, rather than inevitabilities.

So many of the world's religious voices have been more and more active in recognising the sanctity of the earth, and the necessity of paying serious attention to the urgency for change. It calls for another imagination of time: not just whether we'll be fine in the next ten years, or twenty, but whether our children, grand-children, and their grand-children will have a planet that's inhabitable without catastrophic and regular weather crises. This is another imagination of time: curating the future by serious action now.

Response

If you are a member of a faith community and aren't a vocal supporter of the community's climate action plan, we would urge you to consider finding out how to join it.

Similarly, cities, international groups and others all have climate actions plans designed to lobby and put pressure on the industries most able to make the most change. Small individual actions are important, as they help us keep the urgency and motivation for campaigning for larger, mass-scale action to pay attention to the signs that are calling for our response.

Prayer

Jesus of the Apocalypse
When you saw manipulation
you spoke directly to the people in power,
speaking of the earth itself quaking.
The earth is quaking now
and we are in need of response.
Help us – individually, collectively, in halls of government, church
and other powers
to respond to the shaking of the earth
in the light of how we've treated it.
Because this is our home
and the home of generations to come.
Amen.

Further Reading

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Season: Advent

Themes: