

The Coming of the Lord

This weekend sees us entering the season of Advent in the Church's liturgical calendar, the season of "ecclesiastical New Year", with "the coming of the Lord" as its main theme.

Commercially Advent is seen as virtually a dead loss on the High Street, because it so annoyingly gets in the way of Christmas, for which the shops have been hard at work with their Christmas stock for many weeks already. Advent is only good for shifting those tacky Advent calendars, perhaps based on this year's hottest cartoon characters.

So yet again the world makes use of these old Church seasons for its own profitable ends. The notion that either Advent or Christmas might actually be of spiritual importance in today's topsy-turvy times does not get much of a look-in.

Even in the Church Advent is often brushed aside, with Christmas services, carols, lunches and parties coming thick and fast throughout December. By the time of Christmas morning itself, "all ye faithful" might be excused for feeling a little weary with "coming to adore Him"!

But Advent does have so much to teach us. It is a season culminating in the joy of the Incarnation in Bethlehem, but the journey towards that stable is a sombre one. For Advent obliges us to look back, to the long-awaited coming of the Messiah, and also to look forward, to events prophesied long ago but which are yet in the future.

Advent is all about the relationship between Almighty God, the holy and perfect Creator, and us, His unholy and imperfect humanity. The great themes of Advent concern sinfulness, accountability, alertness, judgement, readiness and expectation.

In that bleak conversation in Eden, when Adam and Eve had succumbed to temptation and had fallen into sin (Genesis 3. 1-15), the Lord God promised that a "seed of the woman" would crush the serpent's head, while being struck on His own heel (verse 15).

Since that time and that promise, deeply embedded into Jewish faith was the longing and the expectation that one day Messiah would

come. He would be God's Anointed One, preaching good news to the poor, binding up the broken-hearted, proclaiming freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour and the day of God's vengeance, and comforting all who mourn (Isaiah 61. 1-2).

This Figure was all about release, relief, vindication, mercy, freedom, forgiveness, peace, shalom - in all their fullness. Through all the dark days of Israel's travails - Egypt, the Exodus, the wanderings, the messy conquest of Canaan, the dividing of the kingdom, idolatry, defeat and exile, restoration and further foreign domination - this Messianic prospect burned steadily.

Many, many prophecies were given by the Lord through His prophets about this Anointed One, such as His tribe, His names and titles and the location of His birth. But there were also those puzzling warnings that besides being a King, a Priest and a Judge, this Messiah would also be a Suffering Servant, suffering Himself for the sins of the people (Isaiah 53).

The Messiah duly came, just as had been promised and described. God the Father had meticulously kept to His Eden Promise.

But then, irony of ironies and horror of horrors, this "long-expected Jesus" was "despised and rejected of men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief". What had become of all those wonderful old promises now? - as His followers struggled with His failure, torture, death, and the silent finality of that sealed and guarded tomb.

And yet, and yet His death smashed the grip of sin, truly indeed crushing the serpent's head. His resurrection, the ultimate sign that He is telling the truth, proclaims His victory. The Kingdom of Heaven is now open to all who will take the Lord Jesus at His word, with all that that implies. That gate back into Eden still stands, wide open on its old hinges, for those responding to the Lord's call to pass through.

So in this Advent season we join with our forebears in the ancient hymn - "O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for his mery endures forever!" (Psalm 107.1).

Amen and Amen to that.