

Advent

The Comings of God

Advent, the season in which we celebrate the coming of God. And I think it important that we take the opportunity to focus on what some would call the "big picture". For that reason I want to talk about the comings of God because I think the plural is important. I want to argue that God came; God comes and God will come. That is the big picture.

Firstly, God came. He came in Christ and Advent is a time of preparation for that coming of God in Christ which Christmas celebrates. Which is not to say that Christmas represented the first time that God came. The whole of the Old Testament is the story of God coming, but there it was mainly a verbal coming. At the creation God spoke and the world came into being. Throughout the history of His people God spoke time and again; through prophets and priests, law-givers and kings, sages and songwriters. But the trouble with words is that they can so easily be misunderstood and misrepresented.

In my early years in Rhodesia I preached through an interpreter and it was very disconcerting when I thought I was making a serious point and the congregation doubled up with laughter. Clearly the interpreter had got the wrong end of the stick. And I well remember somebody in the pub bemoaning the fact that he had lost a lot of money on one particular horse. "I put my last shirt on that bleeding horse" he said. To which someone responded, "What a kind man; he put his shirt on a suffering animal".

When God came in Christ He spoke in a definitive way. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us". There could be no possible misunderstanding. God spoke in the language of a human life and there could be no ambiguity. In Christ we see what God is like and from now on we say that God is Christlike. More than that we look at Christ and we understand what we are meant to be and what we can be. That word, spoken in Christ, is definitive for our understanding of God and of what it means to be human. God came.

Secondly, God comes. If you want to use the term 2nd Coming (a term which is not to be found anywhere in the New Testament) then the fact is that God came a second time in and through His Spirit at Pentecost. And God comes to us today through His Spirit; it is not a second coming but a continual coming. The Holy Spirit is none other than God our contemporary.

If God is our contemporary and not locked up in the distant past then we should expect to find Him living, working in our world. Not least in the needs of people who are poor and dispossessed and marginalised. In the parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew chapter 25) Jesus said that some people would get the shock of their lives when they discovered that in feeding the hungry and offering a cup of cold water to the thirsty, in welcoming the stranger and clothing the naked and visiting those in prison they were in fact responding to the Christ who was present in those needs.

By way of illustration I take one example which has left a big impression on me. God confronts and challenges us in terms of that human need which is pandemic throughout Africa. All over Africa and especially in countries like Zambia and Zimbabwe, Malawi and South Africa AIDS is decimating the population. I was in South Africa a year ago and it was quite appalling to travel through the Transkei and every few miles see groups of people huddled around a graveside, burying yet another AIDS victim. It is not just those who have a promiscuous lifestyle who are dying. The vast majority are innocent victims of a plague which is sweeping uncontrollably throughout the continent.

Insofar as we respond to that need; insofar as we facilitate information about AIDS and enable preventative measures to be taken and help fund the medicines that might alleviate the suffering we are in fact responding to the God who comes to us in that need. The God who came to us in the humanity of Christ confronts us again in the humanity of those in real need and desperate trouble.

And in all our human dealings. Not just Aids in South Africa but Foodbanks in Britain today.

In the words of the hymn:

When believers break the bread,
When a hungry child is fed;
Where a stranger's not alone,
Where the homeless find a home,
Praise the love that Christ revealed,
Living, working, in our world.

God came. God comes. And, finally this, God will come. Not for the second time, but for the umpteenth time and instead of talking about a 2nd Coming we should be talking about a Final Coming.

For this is our Christian Faith. There will be a consummation; the God who was there at the beginning will be there at the End; and the End will be marked by the fulfilment of His purpose. History is not an accident waiting to happen; it is heading towards that

"one, far off divine event,
to which the whole creation moves"

We ought to be clear at this point. Many people today live despairing lives simply because they cannot see any meaning or purpose in life. It feels like they are on a never-ending treadmill which goes round and round and round and they cannot get off at any point. As one philosopher said, Life is just one dammed thing after another. Its going nowhere.

Not true. Our Christian Faith says that life is not cyclical but linear. It has a beginning and it moves toward an end. The end, like the beginning, is determined by the Purpose of God and God is present at every stage and at every moment.

So what happens to us is important. And how we respond to what happens is even more important. We can, if we like, simply shrug our shoulders and grin and bear it. Or we can respond in the belief that God works in all things for good with those who love Him and co-operate with Him. We can link ourselves positively and constructively with what Jesus proclaimed to be the purpose of God; the coming of His Kingdom here on earth.

There will be a Final Coming of God, an End, a Consummation. No one can say when that will be or how it will be. Our timescales are miniscule compared to God's eternity. But what does matter is that we respond to God's coming in the here and now; that we play our part in the build-up to the fulfilment of God's purpose; that we give heart and mind and soul and strength to make the coming of His Kingdom a reality in our world.

God came. God comes. God will come. That is the big picture which advent celebrates. And we are part of that picture. As we prepare for the coming of Christ at Christmas we look beyond to a Final Coming and sing...

"Come, Lord Jesus, Everlasting God come down."