

Advent I

“blessed is he that cometh” (Matthew 21.9 = Psalm 118.26).

You are not mistaken if you think that the gospel reading explains the “benedictus” (Blessed is he) which we say in the Eucharistic Prayer. However, the route to it is not quite simple; usually, explicit and accurate quotations of scripture are quite a late development in Christianity.

The early church in fact observed very simple rules. The Eucharistic Prayer - the entire stretch from “It is meet and right so to do” to the concluding “Amen” was a *single* prayer said (normally) by the Bishop, with nothing to interrupt it from the congregation. That prayer did *not* include the “sanctus” (Holy, holy, holy) or the “benedictus” (Blessed is he that cometh).

We think, rightly, that the Eucharistic Prayer takes its rise from Jewish blessings of bread and wine at formal meals, as modified, of course, by Christ. But there was another kind of Jewish prayer, not associated with meals, which made mention of the two Chariot visions (Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1, and which therefore quoted the “sanctus” (Isaiah 6.3) and also Ezekiel 3.12 “Blessed be the glory of the Lord from his place”. It seems that the whole church decided at some time and without any formal procedure to splice the Chariot prayer into the Eucharistic prayer, and also to substitute our verse (Matthew 21.9) for the Ezekiel verse. In the process, the combined text was made congregational even though this broke up the unity of the Eucharistic Prayer.

If you want to be strict about the Prayer Book, there is no warrant in it for the congregation saying the “sanctus”, and the “benedictus” was deleted, probably because it might be thought to suggest transubstantiation, even though the verse had been in use for hundreds of years before anybody thought of that idea. However, congregations seem always to have insisted on saying the “sanctus”, and the “benedictus” has been widely restored.

Now the shallow reference of the “benedictus” is to Christ’s coming amongst us in bread and wine. This is correct; indeed he comes (though we cannot force him to do so and we do not explain the mechanism of the coming) and we rightly thank the Father for that. But that is the *second* coming.

The *first* coming is Christ’s “advent” to Jerusalem. We should realise that “Blessed is he that cometh” as first found in the psalms is a greeting for *any* pilgrim (for that is the meaning of one who “comes in the name of the Lord”). Yet there is a subtlety hidden; remember “Art thou he that should come?” (Matthew 11.3). There were many pilgrims, and we too are numbered among them whenever we come together to meet the Lord (so the verse applies to *each of us* as well) yet there was one Hope of Israel. Christ was indeed the greater Moses, the “prophet like me” whom the Jews expected, and “he came unto his own, and his own received him not”. (The beginning of John’s Gospel is a good text to ponder in this season.)

The *third* coming is at the true “end of history” when Christ will return. Yes, we know that this topic has been much abused, but we cannot avoid it. “Watch therefore, for ye know not on what day your Lord cometh” (Matthew 14.42). That is the idea which underlies the Epistle reading. Christians must always be ready for their Lord. Yes, we know we must die anyway and are wise to be ready for that; but we do not know whether Christ will come first. And “blessed is that servant, whom his Lord when he cometh shall find so doing” (Matthew 14.44 - meaning, shall find performing the duties of his calling). Yes, we must always be ready. And that means (both in our lives and in this service) not just details of conduct, but “put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ”.