

Sermon for Advent II

“Look up...for your redemption draweth nigh.” [Luke 21:28]

Anglican Advent II is rather a puzzle, it is not until the Gospel that we recover the sense of urgency that we should have for watching for Christ's appearing. We start with an odd collect, odd because it is more like an exhortation than any prayer, and odd because it has drifted away from the thought of Christ's coming. Not for the first time, Cranmer has taken his 'eye off the ball.' Possibly he wanted to state his doctrine of Scripture's absolute preeminence at the opening of the Church's Year, but felt that Advent Sunday itself could not be hijacked in this way? But we are almost still at the start today. Cranmer specialists may have an answer? This is the day, traditionally, when the theme of the sermon is Judgement (the second of the "four last things").

Advent itself is a puzzle, in that it draws our attention to an apparent contradiction. We say, with John's Epistle, that "We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and He is the propitiation of our sins." [1 Jn.2:1] and yet elsewhere, in so many passages, Christ is said to be the judge, and is soon to come in judgement. How is it that He can change from the advocate for and 'friend of sinners,' to the judge of sinners? Moreover, in the Gospel that bears John's name, it is said not only that the Spirit is the advocate, but it continues "if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you." [Jn.16:7] How is it impossible for the presence of Son and Spirit to co-exist; and does this mean that the work of Christ – on the Cross and rising from the Tomb – is incomplete? So, at once, we see that it is not just a matter of 'marking and inwardly digesting' the Scriptures, but asking the right questions, and in the right way!

These questions would all seem to be related. Christ's ministry here, undoubtedly, was a ministry of advocacy; and the Epistle to the Hebrews insists that it still is. Nevertheless, there has also been a change of operations. The earthly ministry (at least in St. John's understanding of what his Lord meant) is now performed by the Holy Ghost. It is He who is the 'soul of the Church.' The Lord's 'going away' is a preparation for His return in Judgement. Christ delegates His advocacy on earth to the Spirit, so, at length, Christ will lay aside His priestly garments of Intercession to clothe Himself in the robes of Judge. But it would be a serious mistake to say that Christ, at some unspecified point, *becomes* judge, as this He always was. Indeed His forgiveness of sins during His ministry would depend upon His also being the judge, for what is the forgiveness of sins without that office, a mere turning a blind-eye or wishful thinking? The gravity of sin must be understood before it can be forgiven. The delegation of advocacy to the Holy Ghost might also have fueled another (long standing) controversy concerning from which divine Person the Holy Ghost is said to proceed. The controversy, of course, concerns the *eternal* relations within the Godhead, not the Godhead's operations. In the sense of *temporal* relations and operations, there is no controversy that the Son sends the Spirit.

Nevertheless, it is no simple matter to hold all these ideas in balance. Possibly it has been an oversight to see the Judgement of Christ exclusively in the sense of the commendation or the condemnation of individual souls. The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, suggests that this is done at the point of death. Nor does the Church teach the 'soul's sleep.' If the soul does not go immediately to heaven, then it still knows what is happening to it. The rising from the tombs at the world's end does not take the departed by surprise, even if it catches out the living! Rather the final judgement is a wrapping up of various states of affairs, so – if Intermediate State there be – Purgatory (or the place of probation and cleansing) is no more. There is now only consciousness of the extremities of Heaven and Hell. The devil can no longer tempt anyone, his operations are also shut down. Nor is there a need for study, no Bible reading in Heaven, and probably none in Hell either! We should, therefore, think of Judgement in its broadest terms rather than its narrowest, although, undoubtedly, what concerns us as sinners, is individual judgement (or its last ratification). We want to be with the sheep, not the goats. The narrow interpretation of judgement, therefore, is understandable, but seriously limited. Our Blessed Lord sees this event as joyful: "When these things begin to come to pass, then look up...for your redemption draweth nigh." It may seem curious to be joyful about this but, if we cannot look with gladness upon such signs, what are we doing in the Church at all?