

The Future of Jesus Christ

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Advent is the time in the church's year when we remember that the story of Jesus Christ that we read in the Gospels is not yet finished. Jesus, we know, was born a human being in Bethlehem; when he was adult he spent three years preaching the Gospel of God's kingdom and bringing God's healing into on the lives of all sorts of people, especially the needy, the sick, the beggars, the marginalized. In the end he was put to death on a Roman cross. Three days later he rose out of death, and newly alive he met with his disciples before ascending to the presence of God. All that happened in the past. But Jesus is not just a figure of the past. He is not like other great figures of the past, dead and gone, receding ever further into the past as the course of history rolls on. Jesus is alive in the presence of God and among his people on earth. Jesus is our contemporary and Jesus is also our future.

Last week I said something about living within the Christian story. That's the Big story the Bible tells, stretching from creation at the beginning to new creation at the end. To be a Christian is to see the world in terms of that story, to live within that story, and to live, as it were, in the direction of God's future, in the direction of the kind of completion of the world's history that we know God intends. That future, that Advent hope, is God's renewal of his whole creation, redeeming it and taking all that is of value into his own eternal life. The Advent hope is that big. It is as wide as God's creation. But while I talked last week about the breadth of God's future, encompassing all things, I didn't speak about its centre. That's how Jesus Christ fits in. He stands at the very centre of our hope for the new creation of all things.

That's why the story of Jesus himself has not finished. The future of the whole world is bound up with his future. Jesus is the person through whom God's purposes for his world are coming to fruition and so the completion of his story will also be the completion of the world's history, the moment when God will roll up the whole course of history like a scroll, bringing it to fulfilment and taking it into a new kind of existence in eternity. Jesus is central to all that. He's the key to it.

Why Jesus should be central to the Advent hope, we can maybe see most easily if we just think of one unique fact about his past history. Jesus, alone of all people, rose bodily from the dead. He entered upon a new kind of embodied life beyond the reach of death. That new sort of life is new creation. Jesus has already entered the life of the new creation that is God's promised future for all things. The letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament calls Jesus our pioneer. He's the one who's already gone ahead of us into the new future in order to open the way for us all. He came into the world precisely to redeem it from evil and death, and he did so by entering fully into the world's plight, suffering the worst that can happen to sinners like ourselves, but then rising on behalf of us all into a new future that he has opened up for us. Jesus leads the way. Indeed, as he said, he actually is the way.

That's why, when the early Christians looked to the future, as they constantly did, it was the coming of Jesus Christ that was central. Christians were people who looked for the coming of Christ. Everything else they could hope for the world would come

with him. And so they also prayed for his coming. The earliest Christian prayer, apart from the Lord's prayer, that we know the early Christians prayed when they met together for worship was very simple: 'Our Lord, come!' We actually have it in Aramaic, the ordinary language of the first Christians: *Marana tha*. Paul, writing in Greek to his Greek speaking churches, actually quotes it in Aramaic. He expects them to know it. So foundational was it that even Greek speaking Christians continued to say it in Aramaic. And right at the end of our Bibles, almost the last words of the book of Revelation, there it is again, in Greek this time: 'Come, Lord Jesus' (Rev 22:20). It's the prayer the New Testament leaves with us to go on praying until he does come. Brief as it is, it's a huge prayer. In a sense it's the prayer for everything, the prayer for God to bring all his purposes for the world to completion. Because Jesus himself is central to those purposes, praying for the coming of Jesus sums it all up.

One way in which it might be helpful to put what the New Testament writers tell us about the Advent hope might be this: the future belongs to Jesus Christ. And if we want to realise what the Christian hope means for our lives now, that phrase can sum it up rather well: the future belongs to Jesus Christ. Living with Advent hope means living with the confidence that the future belongs to Jesus Christ. Let's try to reflect on that a little.

If the future belongs to Jesus Christ, what follows from that? Well, first, if the future belongs to Jesus Christ, then the future does *not* belong to the myths of human progress that have been so influential in modern history - all those ideologies which used to persuade us that human history of its own accord is moving inexorably towards some utopia in which all will be well. They came in many forms: Marxist, capitalist, philosophical, scientific, technological, New Age. And in the 20th century they took battering after battering - the horrors of the First World War, the Holocaust, the prospect of ecological catastrophe, to name just a few of the facts that make any myth of human progress incredible today. We live in a disillusioned time when it is very difficult to hope. So it is good news that the future belongs, not to the myths of human progress that have failed, but to Jesus Christ.

If we take a disillusioned, honest look at the world we might well think, yes, there is progress of a kind for some people, the powerful, the affluent, those who are doing well out of our failing economic system. Maybe they will continue to do well, but while they get richer, the poor, as we now realise, are getting only poorer. The future seems to belong to the rich and not to the poor. In many parts of the world the future seems to belong to those who have power and abuse it, and maintain it with violence, and exploit and victimize those they have power over. The future seems to belong to the forces of consumerism and greed that deprive the poor and vandalize the earth.

But if the future belongs to Jesus Christ, then that is not the final truth. If the future belongs to Jesus Christ, then it does not belong to those who *appear* to have it in their power. It does not belong to the tyrants, the thugs and the murderers; it does not belong to the fat cats and the exploiters and the destroyers of the earth. It belongs especially to the victims and the excluded. And it belongs to the Christ-like.

We know this because we know Jesus Christ. We know that he did not side with the powerful elite to whom the future seemed to belong in his time; he suffered precisely

from their attempt to maintain their power and secure the future for themselves. Jesus was one of the victims and the excluded. We know that he did not live a successful life in the world's terms. He was not one of those who seem to make the future. He gave himself to humble loving service of others.

So if the future belongs to Jesus Christ, then we can *see* the future, Jesus Christ's future, in two perhaps unlikely places. We see it, first, in those whom this world treats worst: those whose lives are mostly pain or grinding poverty, those whose lives are destroyed by disease or violence or abuse. These are the people the myths of human progress have never had anything to offer. Human progress can only leave such people behind, the casualties of history. But Jesus Christ does not leave them behind. He will raise them into his future. It is *their* future, in which God himself (as the book of Revelation tells us) 'will wipe away every tear from every eye.'

And should we tempted not to believe in the future of Jesus Christ, it is those people we should remember. People who feel that this life is good enough and feel no need to hope for another are always affluent people leading comfortable, fulfilling lives. They may feel, for the time being, that this life is enough for them, but they have no right to think it is good enough for the millions whose lives have been misery. It is those people for whom Jesus Christ will be revealed in the end - and for the rest of us if we care about them.

The second unlikely place in which we see the future is in the Christ-like people. If the future belongs to Jesus Christ, it belongs to the people who live as Jesus did - not the ambitious self-seeking people who carve out a future for themselves, but the people who live lives of love and service, often largely unnoticed, gaining no credit for themselves, notching up no obvious achievements, giving up perhaps the futures they might have had for themselves in order to devote themselves to others. These are the people to whom the future belongs because it belongs to Jesus Christ.

Therefore, since we know that the future of the world is Jesus Christ's future, we can live our own lives towards *that* future. We need not be taken in by the way the world seems to be going, we need not imagine that the way the world is is the way it must be, we need not accept that the future belongs to the people and the forces that seem to have the power to create it and to destroy it. In the end the future belongs to Jesus Christ. So we can live against the grain of our world, we can live out the values of Jesus, we can come alongside the suffering and the excluded, the neglected and the dying, we can oppose injustice and defy death, we can do all these things because - whatever appearances might suggest - they are the direction in which the future lies.

A lot of good things go on in our world that may not often make the headlines. There are people and groups and movements whose first priority is the sort of needy people Jesus cared most about. I'm sure some people here tonight are directly involved in work of that kind. Others support them with prayer and giving. There are also people who work for peace and justice and the good of God's creation - in the corridors of power. We need to support them too with prayer and encouragement. These are the ways we can practise hope. These are ways we can live the conviction that the future belongs to Jesus Christ and to his priorities for the world. We cannot single-handedly create the future, which is God's to give. But we can live in the direction of his future.

Now you may feel I have left something out of Advent hope as the Bible and the church present it to us. After all, what the Creeds say about it is this: 'he will come to judge the living and the dead.' Had we been living several centuries ago, you might well have been looking at a chancel arch on which judgment day was vividly portrayed: Jesus the judge sorting the sheep from the goats, sending the sheep to paradise and the goats to hell. What would it have been like to have that scene in front of you every Sunday? If Jesus is coming to judge the world, what should we feel about that? Should we be hopeful or fearful?

It might help to put it this way: What will happen when all of us – all the dead of all history – stand before Jesus the judge at the end of history is that the full truth of everything will finally be crystal clear. Each of us will confront the real truth of our lives. There will be no more room for illusion or deceit. We shall see ourselves as only God sees us now. In this life even the most honest of people fail to do that. We hide things even from ourselves – our true motivations, our secret failings. But Jesus said, 'There is nothing hidden that will not be revealed.' Everything will be out in the open and we shall not be able to dispute or deny it. Even the Hitlers and the Herods will have to admit that God's verdict on their lives is nothing but the truth. There will be no room then to hide or to deceive.

Those who in their lives have practised repentance and sought God's forgiveness – and received it – will realise for the first time just how much God had to forgive. They will see the sins they never noticed and the sins they mistook for good. But, of course, the negative is only one side of the truth. Judgment will also reveal what has been good in every life, and there will be surprises there too. We may find ourselves thinking much better of some people than we had done. In facing up to the full truth about our lives there will be pain. It will hard to bear. But for what has been good in our lives and those of others we shall be able to praise and thank God.

In all this we should remember that the judge, Jesus Christ, is the one who embodied the grace and forgiveness of God in his ministry and died precisely for sinners to set us free from sin. Judgment for those who seek God's forgiveness will be a doubtless painful part of the way he liberates us finally and fully from the grip of evil. We shall face up to the painful truth in order to leave it behind as we go into eternity. Judgment will be redemptive. It will purge our lives finally of all that has been wrong with us so that we can be finally fit for God's new creation.

So from this perspective also the future belongs to Jesus Christ. The judge of all the dead, the one who finally pronounces God's entirely truthful verdict on all human life, will be Jesus Christ, the same Jesus Christ we know from the Gospels. That Jesus pulls no punches in exposing evil but he is also abundantly merciful. That's the Jesus who at the very end of the Bible says, 'Surely I am coming soon,' and expects us to join in the response: 'Amen. Come Lord Jesus.'