

Advent Sunday

(St Andrew's Church, St Andrews, 1 December 1996)

All of you who have video recorders will know how frustrating they can sometimes be. The programme you've been really looking forward to watching - shall we say, Wednesday's Inspector Morse film... You sit down to watch your recording of it and you find you set the time wrong or the channel wrong and you haven't got it recorded at all. But even worse than that is when you sit down to watch your recording of Inspector Morse and it plays and you get thoroughly absorbed in the story - until, an hour and a half into the two hour film, the recording stops and you realise you haven't got the last half hour recorded. You'll never know who did the murder or how they're detected.

That's what the church year would be like if we didn't have Advent Sunday. If we had Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost, but not Advent Sunday, we'd be missing that conclusion to the story which the rest of the story absolutely requires if it's to make any sense to us. We'd go through the great events of God's purpose for the world - the birth, the life, the death, the resurrection of Jesus, and the coming of the Spirit - but we'd miss the goal of God's purpose for the world, the completion of God's purpose for all things which is still to come in the future and towards which all that God has done and is doing aims.

Or, to put it another way, we would leave Jesus' own story incomplete: we would celebrate his birth, his death, his resurrection, but not the end of his story which is still to come, what Paul in our second reading calls the day of our Lord Jesus Christ, the day when Jesus Christ will be revealed to the world. Of course, that conclusion to the story hasn't happened yet, so that on Advent Sunday we are not remembering, as we do when we tell the Gospel story of Jesus at Christmas and Easter, nor are we focusing on our present experience of Christ and the Spirit now; on Advent Sunday we are looking forward into Jesus Christ's future, which is also our future and the future of the world. We haven't reached the end of the story, nor can we tell a detailed story about it as though it had already happened, but we do, as Christian believers, know the really important things about how the story will end. We need to know, because we're involved in that uncompleted story. We're living our own lives between Pentecost and the coming of Jesus at the end. Christian lives are lives with direction, lived in the direction of that final completion of God's purposes for us and for the world which Paul calls the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. We live in hope of that day, which doesn't mean just vaguely thinking it's going to happen; it means basing our lives on the hope that God's kingdom is coming in all creation - that God is going to have the last word: not evil or suffering or death or meaninglessness, but God and God's good purpose for his whole creation are going to prevail finally and forever. That's what Paul (in our reading) calls waiting expectantly for our Lord Jesus Christ to reveal himself. Not some kind of passive waiting, but an active living of our lives in the direction of the day when God's purpose will be achieved. So once a year at least, on Advent Sunday, we remind ourselves where we're really going, what the goal is.

I want to focus this morning on the particular phrase Paul uses in our reading to describe that final goal of God's purpose, when he calls it the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. But first of all, to clear the way for that, I want us to be quite clear that

Christian hope is not merely hope for ourselves as individuals. All too often Christians have thought like that: in the catchphrase 'pie in the sky when you die' - an individual pie served just for me in heaven. We're not mere individuals: being human means being connected - connected with each other, connected, as we now realise so much more than we used to, with the whole of the natural world that we are part of and belong to. And the more as Christians we try to enter into God's purpose and God's concerns, the more we care about other people, the world, the whole of God's creation. A hope which extracted us from all that, took us away into some ethereal other world where we shall be mere disembodied spirits would contradict all that it means to be human. And of course that is not the biblical, Christian hope. The biblical, Christian hope is for God's redemption of his whole creation, the new creation of all things. The Christian hope is not merely individual, but cosmic. Our hope as individuals is to find ourselves within God's purpose for his whole creation, to find *ourselves* redeemed for eternal life in a *cosmos* redeemed from evil and suffering and death. The goal of God's purpose is as wide as his creation.

So our hope is for the future of the world, and ourselves within it - but more specifically, more Christianly: it is hope for the world *because* it is hope for the future *of Jesus Christ*. The New Testament does not just speak in general terms about the future, it usually speaks, as Paul does in our reading, of Jesus Christ's future, the coming or the revealing of Jesus Christ, the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. *Jesus Christ* is God's purpose for the world. Jesus Christ is the one who has entered the world's plight in order to redeem it, who has already risen on behalf of the world into new life, and so it is in *his* future that the world will find its final redemption and new creation.

To put it another way, we could say: what Paul means is 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 which have been so influential in recent history. All those ideologies which used to persuade us that human history of its own accord was moving towards some utopia in which all will be well. They came in many forms: Marxist, capitalist, philosophical, scientific, technological, New Age. And they've taken battering after battering this century - 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. The basis for Christian hope is not our ability, left to ourselves, to construct a utopia: the basis for hope is God's purpose of redeeming the world. The future belongs to Jesus Christ.

But there is just one form of the belief in progress to which many people still stubbornly - almost desperately - cling. This is the purely materialistic expectation that our standard of living will continue to rise, everything a flourishing *economy* can give us will be more and more available. The *idealistic* hopes of the past are gone: we don't really expect people to be better people, or wars to cease, or poverty to be

eradicated. We just expect that we will be better off. But this is only progress for some at the expense of others. The affluent get more affluent while the poor get poorer. A quite plausible future is one in which the affluent nations become a kind of embattled fortress protecting their privilege against the poor of the rest of the world. And ever increasing affluence is also at the expense of the rest of creation, which can only be progressively destroyed by it.

You see, if we look hard at the world it can easily seem as though the future belongs to those who are doing well out of the world at the expense of others who suffer. 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 commercialism and consumerism and greed which deprive the poor and vandalize the earth. The future seems to belong to those who have the power to create it, to perpetuate their own power and privilege at the expense of others.

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 to the victims and the excluded. And it belongs to the Christlike.

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 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, the millions who die young before scarcely living at all. 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. 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 we need not hope for another are always affluent people leading comfortable, fulfilling lives. They may feel 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 Christlike 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.

So, to conclude - since we know that the future of the world is Jesus Christ's future, we can live 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 which 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 - despite all appearances - they are the direction in which the future lies. We cannot create the future, which is God's to give. But we can live for his kingdom. We can live in the direction of the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.