

# Advent I Year B 2020

**O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
so that the mountains would quake at your presence.**

This dramatic cry from Isaiah is one of longing; the prophet appealing to God because he feels separated from the source of all life. The people in exile have returned to Jerusalem, but all is ruined. How do they pick up the pieces?

Add to this are the apocalyptic words of Jesus from our Gospel reading today – our first interaction with Mark the Gospel writer, and what an opener! *‘The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory.* Mark is writing these words of the Lord down in similar circumstances. In his time Jerusalem was utterly destroyed by the Romans even more ruthlessly in the most terrible and bloody circumstances. No wonder the Second Coming was at the forefront of early Christian minds.

What are we to make of these dramatic Advent calls?

Advent originated in the early Church as a preparation for Epiphany – the Revealing of Jesus to the World. Remembering this perhaps gives us a sense of what it truly represents. It has a flavour all its own because it is primarily a season of **longing** for God – a deep call to cultivate that expectation within our hearts as part of our journey of faith. It takes us far beyond our journey to Christmastide. Rather, it reminds us of a lifelong journey of exploration of our Christian discipleship – a voyage of discovery of faith and life in Christ, together with the call to share this gift with all we meet.

To me, the words of the Gospel also draw me also to a life of **expectation**. That sense of the Second Coming of Christ is very much part of our identity as brothers and sisters in Christ. Yet the Risen Lord is as much present in the world today as when he walked the shores of Galilee or on the streets of Jerusalem. How can he have gone when we gather around his table Sunday by Sunday, even if, during this strange time, via screens? The one who is the Bread of Life is with us. He has not gone, and his Resurrection glory fills the Church - that world-wide fragile and marred vessel of grace. Christ is present because his life has been given to you and me through baptism. Christ is present whenever people abide in love; present in **all** who seek to transform the world through living through self-giving love, and thus bringing about their own transformation.

Advent is also the time when we focus on our longing for the world to be transformed – to be manifestly shot through with the Love and Glory of God as revealed in the face of Jesus Christ – the Word made flesh. How are we to bring it about? The world? It’s hard to imagine more dysfunction on so many fronts. Looking within our own country, regardless of the pandemic. Slavery - actual slavery - within our villages, towns and cities; the rise of abuse of so many kinds; children exploited by violent drug cartels through the abomination of county lines; food poverty (even within our own school); rampant problems with the rise

of social media and all that goes with it (What a misnomer! social media!). Look at the appalling lack of self-worth which so many young people experience, and then the polar opposite - a preening culture where the exterior worth is more than the interior or where *MY* opinion has precedence even in the face of reason or right.

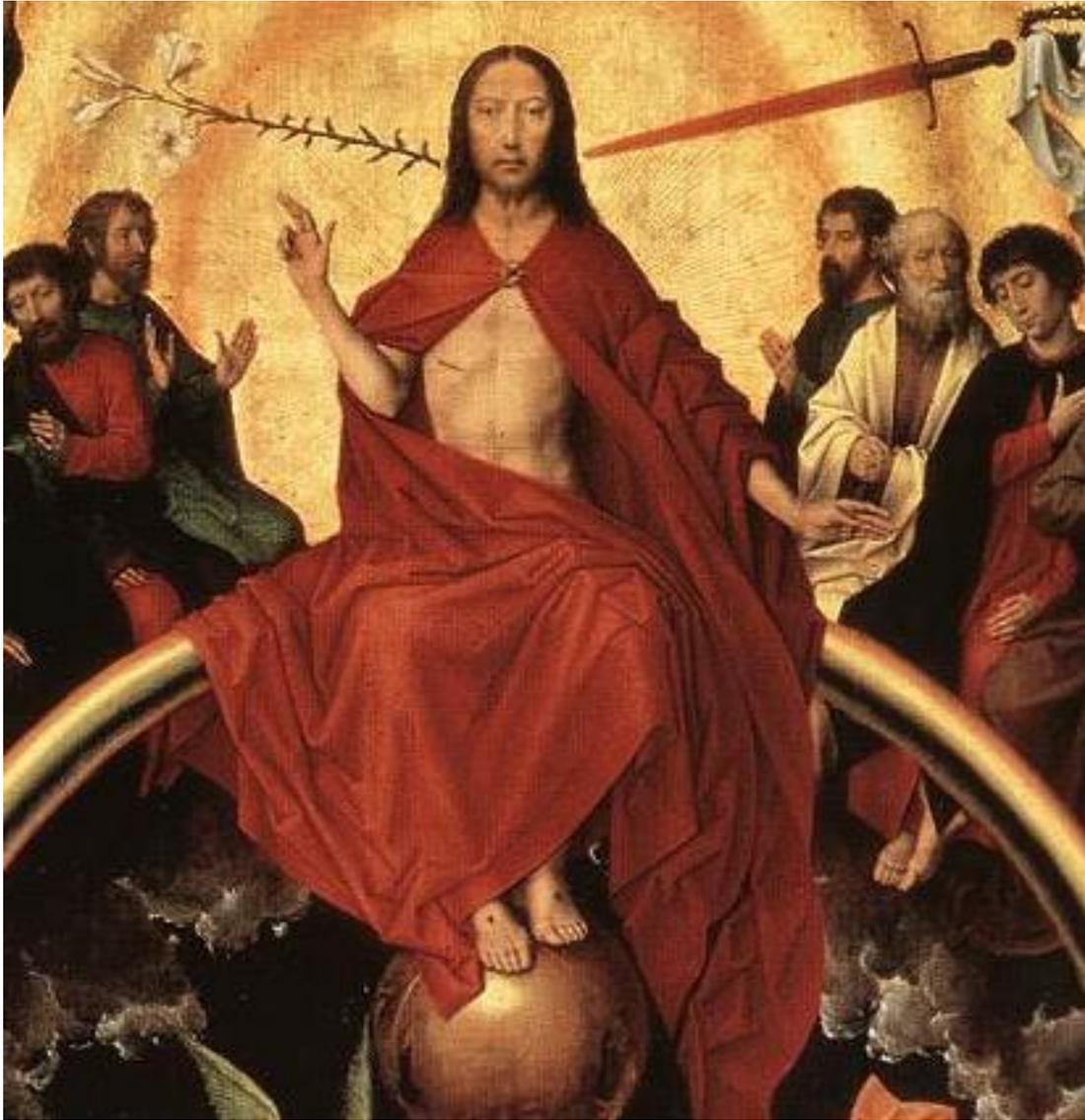
Advent seems to me to be never so relevant because it is the season where we are called to dream and then seek to bring about a better world. I, for instance, want prisons to be, yes, places of punishment, but I also want them to provide real rehabilitation and education, and not dens of brutality, rampant drug use, violence and radicalisation. I want to be part of a country where refugees can't be left in limbo without time-limit. I want to be part of a culture where, no matter what your colour, creed or ability, you are able to prosper and grow – where education and interaction within society is inspirational and releases the multitude of talents all people bear.

And this is *why* the call of Advent – of a longing for God and expectation of the Kingdom Life - is so important and why I want others to join this journey. It is a clarion call reminding us of the fulness of life Christ offers; a radical reminder to experience the fulness of God's love for each of us, which Jesus exemplified in every moment of his ministry.

So Advent is a precious part of our Christian journey - a yearly encounter - when Jesus says to each of us, *'What I say to you, I say to all: Keep awake.'* The worst enemy of our Christian discipleship is indifference or apathy. You may remember that the Book of Revelation begins with John addressing the seven churches of Asia. Of all the seven, that of Laodicea is found most wanting, and not because of any misdemeanour or wrong practice on the part of its worshippers. It is found wanting because it is lukewarm in its faith. John says, *'I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing." You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.* Isn't that something which should resound in our ears during this time of pandemic!

If we don't use this desire and longing for God to bring about the fulness of his Love within our world- the Advent hope- we join the people of Laodicea. If we say, 'O well – tomorrow will do,' then we are not allowing the call of Christ to work effectively within our lives. It's all too easy to back-pedal or coast along, to be ineffectual in our journey. The desire to bring about transformation within the world is born of the knowledge of God's love made known through Jesus Christ and fortified through the life-giving Holy Spirit which quickens every soul. Our journey is one of knowing and growing in the grace of this love, together with our call to share it. We all have a part to play, be it through action of all kinds, prayer or just plain pouring love into every situation. Sometimes it is wearying, sometimes costly, yet always worthwhile.

Ours is a radical Gospel – one of equality, one of compassion, but above all one of love. And Advent is a time to hear Jesus saying to each one of us, ***'Keep awake and listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in.'*** Amen.



*The Last Judgment (detail) - Hans Memling (painted between 1467 and 1471) The National Museum, Gdańsk*

### **Collect**

Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious Majesty, to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Ghost, now and ever. Amen.

### **Isaiah 64: 1-9**

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—  
<sup>2</sup> as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—  
to make your name known to your adversaries,  
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!  
<sup>3</sup> When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,  
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.  
<sup>4</sup> From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived,  
no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.  
<sup>5</sup> You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways.  
But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.  
<sup>6</sup> We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all  
fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

<sup>7</sup> There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered<sup>[c]</sup> us into the hand of our iniquity.

<sup>8</sup> Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

<sup>9</sup> Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity for ever. Now consider, we are all your people.

### **I Corinthians 1: 3-9**

<sup>3</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>4</sup> I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, <sup>5</sup> for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— <sup>6</sup> just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— <sup>7</sup> so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>8</sup> He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

### **Mark 13: 24-end**

Jesus said to his disciples,<sup>24</sup> ‘But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.<sup>26</sup> Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup> Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.<sup>28</sup> From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. <sup>29</sup> So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. <sup>30</sup> Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. <sup>31</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.<sup>32</sup> ‘But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup> Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. <sup>34</sup> It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. <sup>35</sup> Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, <sup>36</sup> or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. <sup>37</sup> And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.’