

St Thomas Becket Church, Hamburg

Sermon preached at Parish Eucharist for first Sunday in Advent by
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28th November 2010

Posted on www.anglican-church-hamburg.de

I must begin by thanking Roger for his kind invitation to preach this morning, on what is of course a very special day in the Church's Calendar.

Unfortunately however, there is an element of sadness to my being here today. First this is the last time HMS ARK ROYAL will ever visit Hamburg, this is her last ever port visit before she is decommissioned, but I am also aware that the last time HMS ARK ROYAL did visit Hamburg, the chaplain on board was the Revd John Hill who died very suddenly earlier this year. Perhaps then, as we enter this penitential season of Advent, you will forgive me for striking a more sombre note.

Because we find, at about this time of year, our thoughts all too easily rush ahead to Christmas. What do many people want Advent to be about? We often want it to be something lovely, almost Christmasy! And then we get brought up short with that reading from Matthew's gospel that sets a very different tone:

It is frightening and wakes us up from our pre-Christmas lethargy.

There were two workers in the field and one shall be taken and the other one left. That is frightening stuff. Two women will be grinding meal. One shall be taken and the other left. Matthew starts to draw a terrifying picture – one that is far removed from our comfortable thoughts about Christmas.

Jesus, the one that we want to proclaim to the world as the prince of peace is portrayed as a thief in the night. What more antisocial thing could you say. The situation is so drastic it is even compared to a time when another ARK was needed to save the righteous!

Is this really good news for the world? This is a problem for us. So, what is going on here?

Well we need to know something today not just about Jesus. We need to know something about Matthew, the author of the Gospel which we've just heard.

Matthew is the sort of person who sees the world in a Black and White sort of way. Matthew tended to sort the world out into opposites.

Good and Evil
Life and Death
Heaven and Hell
Good fruit and bad fruit
Prudent bridesmaids and foolish ones
Wheat and weeds
The blessed and the cursed
Sheep and Goats

Unlike Mark, Matthew doesn't like loose ends and wants to give the reader a much more straightforward account of the life of Jesus. Reading Mark's Gospel with its loose ends and enigmatic ending would have frustrated Matthew. And so, when he thinks of the end of the world, he seems to think of it in a much more straightforward and logical way.

It is often tempting to ignore bits of the bible because they make us feel uncomfortable. The end of time seems so distant, that Christians throughout the ages have said – "Act as though it is right now." How would you behave? How would you relate? How would you live your life? How would you do all these things if the end of the world were tomorrow?

The message to live life as though the end of time is tomorrow is not a threat but an encouragement to live a life that is totally committed to Christ today and every day.

When Matthew writes, he is writing simple things in black and white and the thing that he tells us is simply this. Be ready. Be always ready.

The Officer of the Watch, all watch-keepers, on board keep lookout for anything which might threaten our ship; this Advent, as with every Advent, we do the same thing for our souls; perhaps it means not being sucked into, and totally dominated by, the commercialism of Christmas but rather we are encouraged to be aware of the real object of our faith.

So, what at the outset seemed frightening is perhaps a little less so now. Advent is about the coming of someone who loves us. And the start of Advent is as good a time as any for getting ready for his coming.

So then, how are we to do this? One thing at a time. What one thing can you do, starting this advent, to bring the kingdom of God that little bit closer? What one thing can you do, starting today, to bring the kingdom to those around you? Think about it. What one thing could you do, starting right now to bring heaven that little bit nearer?

The declaration of the Kingdom of God is not to be feared as a kind of threat, but it is a call and it is an answer to a prayer – we do not fear this moment we pray for it every time we pray in the way Jesus taught us to pray, for the coming of his Kingdom.

In reality one thing we are often most short of at this time of year is time; time to take stock of where we are in our relationship with God before we welcome him once again in the Christ-child at Christmas.

Let me finish then by asking you to try and allow yourselves time to observe a holy Advent in the coming weeks, that when Christmas finally arrives it is not merely happy or 'merry' but far more importantly it is 'holy'.