

Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
First Sunday Of Advent
November 30th 2008
by the Reverend Alan Neale
“Not Yet!”

Today, Advent Sunday, is really an exciting (even thrilling!) day – it is almost a perfect expression of the Anglican/Episcopal love of tension, creative tension and paradox. It has been said, by the way, if someone does not love paradox... they probably will not enjoy being within the Anglican/Episcopal community! In Advent we celebrate the coming of Christ as a tiny baby but also as a majestic King; we wait for the future cosmic hope to be revealed but we also look with expectancy for the ways in which Christ will come to us day by day.

Today we (the whole church) can be wonderfully and gloriously countercultural – to the surprise of some of our friends and many of our neighbours, we wish each other “Happy New Year” for on this first Sunday of Advent the Church’s New Year begins.

And so, “Happy New Year”. For all of its exciting meaning, and for all of its otherworldly references, Advent really propels us to be as countercultural as we dare to be. At this time of the year I sometimes feel like a cross between King Canute and Ebenezer Scrooge. Like King Canute I try to wave some liturgical and theological hand and hold back the tide of Christmas/Holiday references (I can assure you that a priest who does that tempts disfavour with both esteemed members of Altar Guilds as well as beloved members at home). And the reluctance to celebrate Christmas in Advent can sometimes earn one as much opprobrium as the master of “Bah humbug” – Ebenezer Scrooge.

But, friends, seriously I believe this season of Advent – of encouraging patient and expectant waiting, of strengthening and celebrating hope – that this season is of crucial need not only to the church but also to the world as yet outside the church... as we observe a world, a nation, and individuals, which can all too easily be tempted to despair or tempted to use force and violence as a means to inaugurate a time of blessed peace (how ironic!).

We find it difficult to wait... with hope, with dignity, with courage... but nevertheless the truly authentic Advent experience may be summed up in two words *‘Not Yet’*.

“Not yet – we’re not ready”.

“Not yet – but it will be coming soon”.

“Not yet – we’re not ready”. On Friday, probably in a post-Thanksgiving mental haze, I watched the film “Mr. Magorium’s Wonder Emporium”. Preparing his friend for his departure, his death, Edward Magorium tells her, “I fell so completely in love with these shoes, I bought enough pairs to last my whole lifetime. This is my last pair”. Edward knew that, knew when he would die – few have that same experience. Advent is a reflective time when we take stock and see how ready we are for the Lord to appear before us as Friend yes, but also as King.

Listen to St. Peter, “*Since everything here today might well be gone tomorrow, do you see how essential it is to live a holy life? Daily expect the Day of God, eager for its arrival*” and “*So, my dear friends, since this is what you have to look forward to, do your very best to be found living at your best, in purity and peace. Interpret our Master’s patient restraint for what it is: salvation*”. I think back to those worrying days of examinations; of large halls packed with desks and examinees scribbling as fast as they could and then the moment when the examiner declares, “Pens down”... and the plaintive look on many a face, “Oh, not yet, not yet... we are not ready”. As John Greenleaf Whittier writes, “*For of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: ‘It might have been!’*”. Or again, to quote Harriet Beecher Stowe, “*The bitterest tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid and deeds left undone.*”

And secondly, *“Not yet – but it will be coming soon”*. Most parents have known the sullied joy of driving or traveling with young children. All too easily, all too quickly, the mantra becomes “Are we there yet?”. Well, Advent should stir up in us the belief that very soon, very quickly, we will be there and, with us, the whole of this creation. Listen to the prophet Isaiah, “Every valley will be lifted up, every mountain made low... he will feed his flock, he will gather the lambs, he will carry them in his bosom”. And if you and I feel some frustration, and a little despair, as we try to cling to this hope... just think of the ache in the heart of God as He also with us waits. “Not yet... but it will be coming soon”.

The lack of this hope will cause some to despair, others to take violent and inappropriate action but we must, in the words of Jesse Jackson, “keep hope alive, keep hope alive”. Or, in the title words of a book written by President-elect Barack Obama... we are called to live with “the audacity of hope”.

So how do we keep hope alive? How do we live in and with “the audacity of hope”?

We do so in reflection, in worship and in community.

Keep hope alive in reflection – you and I need to make time to reflect upon the nature of God and the experience of God. We do that best as we read the Bible, we do that best as we read books of prayer and meditation, we do that best as we dare to speak of God to one another and to break that wretched sound barrier which inhibits the blessing of hearing and speaking of God to another.

Keep hope alive in worship – our worship together strengthens the spirit and quickens the mind. It reminds us to focus not upon ourselves but upon the King – the One who is coming very, very soon. Our worship, if we are so open, will lead us to moments of vision of the goodness and reliability of God – He can be trusted. He says, “Not yet” and our hearts are disappointed but then He says, “It will be coming soon”.

And keep hope alive in community – we need be all together because by ourselves we do not have it altogether! I believe we need one another to nourish and nurture our hope. Lead me to a ‘bus or train stop where no-one else is waiting and I become nervous, unsure as to whether this is the right stop, the right platform – but waiting with others gives strength and encouragement as they confirm by their presence, and by their word, “yes, this is the place to be waiting”.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we need “keep hope alive”, we need practice and experience “the audacity of hope” for the promise is sure (as expressed in today’s Eucharistic Prayer B) – “In the fullness of time, He will put all things in subjection under Christ and will bring us to that heavenly country”.

Not yet – today He has given us time to get ready. Not yet – but He will surely come.

AMEN