

## THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME

St. Michael, Cornhill

Sunday December 14<sup>th</sup> 2014

### Advent III

Emails have, of course, revolutionised the lives of many of us. They can be a great boon – keeping us all in touch; they can be a menace – a chore to answer them; they can even be alarming. I recently read just one such case. A husband and wife living in the northern Midwest of the U.S.A. – in Minnesota – were off on holiday to Florida. It was very hectic and the husband left first with the wife following the next day. Meanwhile, at the same time, in Houston, a priest's wife had just returned from her husband's funeral – he'd died suddenly of a heart attack. She checked her emails for condolences. After the first message she screamed and fainted.

For, the other man had arrived in Florida and sent an email on his arrival at the hotel – but accidentally left out one letter in his wife's email address, which sent it inadvertently to the grieving widow. It read:

'I know you'll be surprised to hear from me, but they have computers here now and you're allowed to send emails to your family so I just wanted you to know I've just arrived and been checked in. I see that everything is prepared for your arrival tomorrow and seeing you then! Hope your journey is an uneventful as mine was. P.S. Sure is freaking hot down here!!!'

Now over the past few weeks, the readings – at Morning and Evening Prayer and at the eucharist have often conveyed this same sense of the nearness of death, and even the end of all things. There have been lots of hints of God preparing *very soon* to wind up everything. Indeed, in days gone by, these four Sundays of Advent were given apocalyptic themes. Those four themes were death, judgment, hell and heaven. So this Sunday would have been *hell* and it was assumed – to use that American phraseology – it was freaking hot down there.

In comparison, today's readings appear as comparatively mild. The prophet Isaiah set us off with that piece which we hear Jesus quoting in the gospels at one point as he reads in the synagogue in Capernaum: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me.' The second reading, from St Paul, from his first letter to the Thessalonians is also mild and encouraging: 'Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.' Finally, in the gospel, as with last week, we encounter John the Baptist again – this time the passage is from the gospel of John. Even here there is a tentative start with the Jews not quite getting the hang of the status or persona of the Baptist.

But, behind each of these passages, there remains a sense of urgency, a sense of foreboding even – be ready, for you know not the hour or the time. So elsewhere in that piece from St. Paul we heard the apostle say: '... may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the *coming of our lord Jesus Christ.*' God's arrival on earth is imminent. Or, the Baptist warns: 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "*Make straight the way of the Lord.*"

So, with warnings rather like those received accidentally by the terrified widow, when she opened the mis-directed email, the end seems to be near. Alongside this then, we remember the other ancient themes of Advent, which precede *Heaven*: they were *Death* and *Judgment*. Death remains a taboo word for many and judgment is unfashionable. Indeed one of the reasons that some people are put off the *Book of Common Prayer* is that it can feel pre-occupied with judgment. Many years ago, the theological writer, Harry Williams said it felt a bit like an aeroplane that couldn't confidently take off. You confessed and were absolved – then the *Comfortable Words* took you back to sin. You heard these, then came more penitence in the *Prayer of Humble Access*.

But it is easy to mistranslate or misdirect *judgment* as an attitude. Judgmentalism is a very unattractive trait. It smacks of moralism, or patronising those whom one feels are less worthy than you. It is an attitude utterly foreign to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus accepts people for who they are. In offering themselves to God, we shall be transformed. So, that first reading captures a quite different sense of *judgment*. Judgment there implies a new sense of proportion. To say someone has judgment is a compliment. Judgment in these readings then implies *crisis*, that is in a positive sense. Crisis is a time of decision.

All this implies a very different feel to the impending arrival of Jesus in only ten days time. It is not the fear of *freaking heat* or the terror of a nasty judgmentalism. Instead it is a moment of decision, opening up a new world. We should be alert; we should use our judgment; we should prepare for God's coming in Jesus. It will change our world, but opening our hearts to God, it will once again offer a transformed view of our humanity – now that, *as in Jesus*, is true judgment indeed.

Amen

Readings:

Isaiah. 61. 1-4, 8-end.

I Thessalonians. 5. 16-24

John I. 6-8, 19-28.