

Sunday 3 December 2017

First Sunday in Advent, St Andrew's Church, Cobham

8 a.m. service

Isaiah 64.1-9; 1 Corinthians 1.3-9; Mark 13.24-end

Advent and the frog in the well

They say that trying to describe God is like trying to describe the world to a frog at the bottom of a well. All the frog can see is a circle of sky, and so it concludes that the world beyond the well consists only of sky. The frog writes the world off as being not worth the effort of escaping the well. It remains in darkness.

It can be the same with we humans when we try to understand God. We run the risk of getting hold of one small part of God's nature and building our view of him around that.

This can be very dangerous for our spiritual life. Why?

One reason is that, like the frog, we might write God off as not being worth the effort. Many people react like this to the 'angry old man in the sky' picture of God.

But there is another reason that it is dangerous, and that is because we become like the thing we worship.

If we get hold of a wrong image of God, we run the danger of becoming spiritually deformed. This is what lies behind the commandment not to worship idols. Just think of the many references in the Old Testament to the detestable God, Molech, the God of child sacrifice whose worship seduced so many into great evil, including even King Solomon (1 Kings 11.5).

This is why the season of Advent is such an important time in our church calendar. It is because we are meant to hold before us two images of God, and in doing so arrive at a greater and truer picture of what God is like, a picture that will encourage us to escape the confines of the little well in which we live.

They appear to be contradictory images, as if God has a split personality. But in holding the two images together, we get nearer to an idea of God's true nature, and our proper spiritual growth is assured.

- The first image, of course, is the baby Jesus, born into this world poor, fragile, helpless, completely dependent on his parents and the kindness of strangers. It is the image of God incarnate in His world, offering Himself to us completely, without any self-protection, driven by his great love for us. This is the image that dominates at this time of year, the one we rightly celebrate with joy at Christmas.
- But at the same time, at Advent, we are presented with the gospel images of the Jesus of terrifying power, the Lord of all. In Mark, he appears in clouds of great power and glory, sending his angels to gather those he has chosen, his elect, from the four corners of heaven and earth. In the other synoptic gospels, Matthew and Luke, Jesus' return is followed by a time of judgement, where people are thrown into the outer darkness (Matthew 25.30) or punished with death (Luke 19.27). It's an image that should be sobering, if not downright scary.

How are we meant to hold these two apparently contradictory images together in one coherent understanding of the world beyond the well?

The answer is that there is in fact no incoherence, no contradiction. The infant Jesus and the returning Christ, Judge of the World, make perfect sense as reflecting God's nature.

That's because God's nature consists of two principal things.

One is holiness.

The other is love.

It is important to hold both of these things together in our understanding of God. As soon as we start to emphasize one and forget the other, our faith becomes distorted.

- If we dwell only his holiness, without remembering his love, we will tend to think mainly of his hatred of sin, and we will become judgmental, possibly even self-hating or, which is worse, self-satisfied.
- But if we dwell only on his love, we will start to slide into a dangerous state where we think that whatever makes us feel good must be acceptable to God. God wants us to be happy, we think, and therefore this thing I am doing must be OK. We see this often in sexual sin. I once heard a former priest from the Episcopalian church in America describe how he justified his adultery. As he drove back and forth on the motorway in the grip of a

great temptation he finally succumbed to the thought, 'I've worked so hard for the church, I deserve this now.'

It is only by holding together the two images of God that we can escape these grave spiritual errors.

On the one hand we must remember that because of God's holiness he must hate most of what we think and do. In the words of Isaiah from our reading this morning:

*How then can we be saved?
All of us have become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;
we all shrivel up like a leaf,
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.* Isaiah 64.5b-6.

But the proper response to this understanding is not to give up in despair or to focus on how we can save ourselves through good works or self-flagellation. The proper response is to look to God for his help.

And so we turn to that other attribute of God: his love. 'God demonstrates his own love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.' (Romans 5.8). While we recognize that we are lost and broken sinners who cannot hope to meet God's standards of holiness, we do not despair but turn instead to that infant in the cradle, and praise God that he gives himself to us, out of pure love, to help us become holy. In the words of Paul to the Corinthians in our reading this morning:

Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you strong to the end so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 1.7-8)

And so, at Advent, as we reflect on God's holiness and judgment (expressed in Christ as Judge of the World) and also on his immense love (expressed in the birth in this world of his own Son, Jesus Christ, as a fragile baby) we move beyond the frog's view of the small blue circle at the top of the well. We move to a more complete understanding of what God is truly like, and in so doing we can be saved.

Praise God.

Amen.

