

Advent Sunday, Eschatology

Give by Kathy Roberts at the Benefice Service, St Mary's, Black Torrington
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Introduction:

Jesus said unto them: *"Who do you say that I am?"*

And they replied: *"You are the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being, the kerygma in which we find the ultimate meaning of our interpersonal relationships."*

And Jesus said: *"What?"*

Actually, nothing in that little bit of graffiti found on a wall of St John's University, New York is gobbledy-gook! The only word I want to focus on is eschatology.

A Dictionary definition of Eschatology is:

"The study of the last things e.g death, divine judgment and life after death". It's a bit broader than that because it encompasses the end time and the signs of the end time.

"In contrast to cyclical conceptions of history, the biblical writings understand history as a linear movement towards a goal. God is driving history towards the ultimate fulfillment of his purposes for his creation. Biblical eschatology is not limited to the destiny of the individual; it concerns the consummation of the whole history of the world, towards which God's redemptive acts in history are directed". (New Bible Dictionary 1982:342)

The Christian viewpoint is entirely different from the popular understanding *"what goes round comes round"*. We speak of history repeating itself, it does, but somehow as it repeats, the next time is slightly different. It mutates, it moves on.

We often speak of life as a journey. The current Lloyds TSB strapline is *"for the journey"*. A journey has a defined beginning and an end. Our physical lives have a beginning and an end. We are all journeying towards our ultimate destination.

We reflect on our own lives, how we are living them, how we would like to be remembered when someone dies. Advent with its focus on eschatology, causes us to reflect on what we are doing with our lives, how we will face God. History is linear and moving towards its ultimate climax before God.

The Advent call is to wake up, to become alert to the way we are living.

Becoming alert requires us to prepare our hearts, prepare our minds, and prepare together for standing before Jesus.

Preparing our hearts

Preparation of our hearts starts with prayer. John Chrysostom said *“find the door of your heart, and you will discover it is the door of the Kingdom of God”*. We all know that when we look into our hearts we find all sorts of stuff we don't particularly like. So we spend a lot of time simply avoiding what's there, avoiding any real praying.

But *“to live without prayer is ultimately to disbelieve in God”*. (Houston 1993:15)
And prayer dies even when we are busy doing good, serving God. One of the most prayerless places, said James Houston in his book, *“Prayer: the transforming friendship”* can be a church.

Bishop Ryle commented over a century ago: *“I have come to the conclusion that the vast majority of professing Christians do not pray at all”*.

One of our excuses for not praying is busy-ness – especially true at Christmastime! Yet busy-ness can become as addictive a drug as any other.

In prayer we come to know ourselves – and that is what causes us discomfort and dis-ease. But it is in that place of discomfort that God comes to us and shows us his acceptance of us. It's the place where we can be at home.

This Advent, take time to sit quietly with God, with yourself – like the old peasant who after a hard day in the fields went to sit in the nearby church. When asked what he did, he replied I look at Him and He looks at me. That's the essence of prayer!

Beware of your busy-ness what is it covering up? What are you avoiding?

In their pastoral letter the bishops emphasized prayer as the beginning point of growth - personal, church, change in society. I look at Him and he looks at me.

Preparing our hearts also requires us to prepare our minds.

Preparing our minds

Do we know what we believe and why we believe it? Do we, week by week, recite the creed with our mouths, but with our minds switched off?

Like Jews and Muslims, Christians are known as People of the Book – do we live up to that? Help is available if we are intimidated by the size of the task. There are Bible Reading Notes - free - at the back of the church. There are other aids, emails with daily verses and websites that can help.

Preparing our minds means engaging with the issues of faith - ethical issues, theology, the origins of the Bible, the doctrines that underpin our faith. We cannot engage intelligently with others about our faith unless we ourselves have engaged with the issues.

Most of us struggle with doubts – what do we do? We can debate, discuss, read widely, listen to others ... and be open to change our minds and opinions in the light of what we hear and understand.

To dismiss bits of the Bible, or bits of the creed because it doesn't make sense to us without engaging with the issues just makes us look silly. What's the basis of your belief? Heart experience of God goes hand in hand with reason.

We prepare our hearts and our minds for our journey, but we also need to prepare together.

Preparing together

The bishops wrote the poignant question posed at the clergy conference:

"What will you say when you finally stand before God, and the others are not with you?"

We are accountable for each other. We will come together before God – with one another as the Body of Christ and we are responsible for those who at this moment as yet do not know the Lord. Our praying, our intellectual wrestling, yes, is our own, but it is done together.

We were encouraged at the combined PCC meeting by Penny Dobbin and team from Weare Giffard. Their enthusiasm, their love and respect for one another, their willingness to try new things was contagious!

At the church wardens' meeting the next day we discussed encouraging more people to join us at benefice services - rather than seeing this as a 'Sunday off'! We spoke of planning special services together, sharing the leadership of worship together.

The bishops have urged us to

"Stop, listen, re-engage with the Word of God, reconnect with our traditions, and be renewed in our common life"

We can get very fearful, even hysterical about the end times, about our own death – I read yesterday that even Billy Graham has had to struggle with his own fears about dying. We live, as William Barclay put it, *"in the shadow of eternity"*. But it is about living each day in that awareness – if we are getting to know God, living our lives in awareness of God, there is nothing to fear as history marches on towards the ultimate goal of God's fulfillment of his plans for his creation.

Do everything you can to get ready!

Let's, undertake, on our own, with others: to pray, to read, discuss, debate. We can't formulate our beliefs if we haven't done the background reading, the praying, the debating. We may not like being contradicted or disagreed with, but it is in the disagreement truth starts emerging.

If there are people we can't get on with – make an effort to sort the difficulty out. Don't moan and complain, or vote by your absence.

We are after all, Christians Together!

Next year's programme which will include opportunities for debate and discussion about issues. Be part of that!

There will be Quiet Days. Use them to listen to God. Don't make excuses about being busy!

The Lent course will be a continuation of this year's highly successful and thought provoking course.

“Companions in Christ”, designed to help us learn more about what it means to be disciples, will also begin next year.

Borrow books, find out where you can buy material for yourself. Use the free publications that are on offer at the back of the church. Do everything you can to get ready!

Conclusion

William Barclay says that *“we must so live that it does not matter when [Jesus] comes”*. There is no room for complacency. Wake up, be on the watch, said Jesus! *“Our task is to make every day fit for him to see and being at any moment ready to meet him face to face.*

All life becomes a preparation to meet the King”. (Barclay 1975:321)

References

William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, St Andrew Press, 1975

JD Douglas, editor, *New Bible Dictionary*, IVP 1982

James Houston, *Prayer, the transforming friendship*, Lion 1993