

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

ADVENT 1

1st December 2013

Isaiah 2:1-5
Romans 13:11-14

“Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!”

This was the call of the ancient prophet to God's people, and it is still the call that comes to us today. On this first Sunday of Advent we light a candle and remember that Jesus is the light of God coming to be the light of the world. We thought about that earlier in the service.

Walking in the light of the Lord is a happy thought, a good idea, to put it mildly. And yet I had the hardest time getting today's service together. When I stopped to analyse why that was it was quite simply that I am not ready to deal with Christmas yet. I don't mean in terms of the traditional family celebration – well I do – I mean, I'm no way prepared for that either. But what I'm really not read for yet is to deal with Christmas' big themes, of God coming into this world as one of us, coming to change things, coming to make things, to make us, to make the world anew. The Christmas themes are so huge and to begin to approach them we need energy and commitment.

We come year by year to the words of the prophet, words of hope, and this year I read “They shall beat their swords to ploughshares, neither shall they study war not more” and I thought “Well, that's not happened yet.” And nor it has. And I know that because it has not happened yet the world still needs, more than ever needs to hear and grapple with, and understand the big themes of Christmas. But I am not ready.

And that's is OK. This is not yet Christmas. It is Advent. And Advent is the time when we are called to wake up, when we are given a space to prepare ourselves to deal with the big themes of Christmas. And I know, because it happens every Advent, that during the next couple of weeks someone will probably moan at me and say “It's December, why are we not singing carols?” But if we rush too fast into Christmas, without getting ready, without waking up, without understanding what it means to walk in the light of the Lord, then we are liable to miss the meaning of the celebration, and come to Christmas Day itself feeling jaded. And that would be a real tragedy.

It is great that Advent comes before Christmas. It is such a gift given us in wisdom by the Church Fathers. Advent comes with a freshness about it. It is a new year, it is a new beginning, the call comes to us, today from St. Paul, to “Wake Up!” Wake Up! Because this is a new day and you never know what might happen before night falls. Wake up, and find out how coming out of the night has changed your problems and challenges. Wake up and embrace a new day that will be unique in your life and unique in the

history of the world. Now there's a thought, a thought for Advent, and a thought for every single new day that there is.

Here's another thought. "Our salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed." That's St. Paul, always looking at life in terms of God's redemptive plan – which is not a bad way to look at it. What he says about our salvation being nearer now another thought that is new and true every single day, or every year – or every Advent. Of course part of that nearness of our salvation is a simple matter of chronology: we are each day one day older, one day nearer to our death, to the day when we will come into God's perfect presence, and know our personal salvation through Jesus to be complete. That's a way of looking at the inevitability of death that we would do well to think about more often – that death brings our salvation to completion.

But the nearness of our salvation from day to day is also a matter of spiritual growth. The Advent call is the call to wake up, to lift up our heads, to look around us and take stock. It is the call to see the light that is Christ shining in the world. The rest of the world has a wake up call at New Year, when they are jaded after Christmas, but we have it now, before Christmas, which is not going to jade us, but to fill us with joy and hope. The call is to walk in the light of the Lord. The call is, as St. Paul says, to put on Christ himself. The call is to make sure that every day we are aware that our salvation is nearer to us than when we first believed.

So this Advent we wake up and embrace our salvation, nearer to us now than ever before, knowing that God is with us, that he will not turn from us, so we can be sure that as we seek to meet him in our daily lives, he will be there. We wake up, and waking, we have to get up, and get dressed – get dressed in what? Paul mentions two items, but they are the same thing put in different ways. "Put on the armour of light" he says, and then later he explains what he means by saying "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ."

This is Advent, when we celebrate the light of God coming into the world. This is Advent when we remember that the decisive event that paved the way for the world to be changed by God's light happened in the resurrection of Jesus. This is Advent when we are called to wake up, get up and clothe ourselves in Jesus.

Clothing ourselves in Jesus means remembering that it is because of Jesus that our salvation is nearer to us daily. It means remembering that God sees us as it were through the lens of Jesus. Just as many of us cannot see things clearly, either near at hand or far away without the help of the lenses of our glasses, so we do not see ourselves clearly if we do not remember that Jesus is the lens which brings our lives into focus; and the lens which enables God to see us, not with all our flaws and failures, but in the perfect focus of his forgiving love.

Clothing ourselves in Jesus may mean various things practically. Some people like to ask themselves in the various situations of their day "What would Jesus do here?" Some even wear a WWJD wristband to remind them to do this. Some people make a practice of remembering that they are baptised, whenever they use water, to keep Jesus, his person and his work at the forefront of their minds. Some people remind themselves daily of the saying of St. Theresa that

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,*

*Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.*

Some people use the act of dressing as a prayer, asking that just as their body is clothed with the garments they wear, so their naked humanity might be clothed and covered by the love of Christ, that people may see him and not us. All sorts of things that we can do to clothe ourselves in Christ, to grow towards him. If you take one of the Advent devotionals home with you today and use it, that can be a help. If you take one of the HIV calendars home and use it, in a different way that can help you draw closer to God in thought and action.

Clothing ourselves in Jesus, remembering that we are clothed in and by him is important if we are to follow the Advent admonition "Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!"

Chronology and spiritual growth, but there is another way in Advent in which we remember that our salvation is daily closer to us, and that is by God being near us and Jesus being in us. If salvation is inevitably nearer to believers by the passage of time, and if salvation is kept nearer to us by our making the effort to put on Christ, by our determining to grow and learn and stay close; the third way is God's gift to us: God has determined to stay close to us, to be present with us – unless we wilfully turn away.

Today we remember God's gift of his presence with us as we gather around the Lord's table. At the beginning of Advent, when we are told to wake up and get dressed, this communion meal, which we call the Lord's supper, is our breakfast. God has promised to be close to us and he came to us as Jesus, to be as close as it is possible for one human to be with another; to share all that we know in life of joy and pain. And God has promised to give us his Spirit to be so close to us that he is in us and we are in him. As we take the bread and wine let us remember that the bread reminds us of Jesus' body – that he became human, one of us – one of the big themes of Christmas. And as we take the wine let us remember that it stands for Jesus' life, which, through his Spirit, is now in us, so that his body on earth now is us, because we have his life within and among us, because we are clothed in Christ. Amen.