

Laggan and Newtonmore

Church of Scotland

Rev. Catherine Buchan

1st December 2019

Genesis 2:8-17, 3:8-10

Revelation 21:1-6

Over the next month three times in three schools I will give the children an advent assembly – I always like to do advent before we get to Christmas. And at that assembly I will ask the children what “Advent” means, and eventually we will have someone say that it means the time before Christmas – they mainly associate it with advent calendars, of course (though I have seen them called countdown calendars in some places!). And I will tell them that the season of advent is indeed the time before Christmas but that you can use the word without its Christmas connotations, and what it means is “coming”. The season of Advent is the season when we think about coming. The I will ask the children who is coming and almost with one accord they will answer Santa! (And that’s where we get down to work....)

Advent is the season of coming, not Santa coming – I usually say that Santa may well be coming, but he wouldn’t come if Jesus didn’t come first – but of God coming. God coming to earth. God coming to be with the people that he made. Immanuel, God with us, coming. And it is amazing. It is amazing and it is what the entire history of the world and our interaction with our creator has been about – about God coming.

The story of creation in Genesis paints a lovely picture of ideal harmony between humanity and God by telling us that having made a man and a woman God came and walked with them in a garden in the cool of the evening. It is such a picture of beauty and order. They are in a garden – a place where nature is tamed and made both beautiful and fruitful. And it is in the cool of the evening, the time of rest, and, in hotter places than here, the time when people can relax in comfort. And then, in the time of rest and relaxation, God comes and walks with them. The harmony between creator and creation is complete. They have done

their work of the day and they can rest together in the evening, without fear or restraint. That is the ideal picture. God comes to us and there is nothing between God and us and between each other in God' presence.

Of course it didn't remain that way for long, even in the story, because the second and third chapters of Genesis is a story about why things are not ideal. And we know that things are not ideal, but it is good to remember what the ideal is: that we should be perfectly at ease in God's presence, with God and with one another, with nothing to regret, nothing to hide, relaxed and resting. The ideal is that God comes to us.

We did not read the whole of the story, of course. But we know that it tells us that this state of affairs did not last. And indeed we all know that. You don't need a story giving you a narrative about it to know that we do not live in such harmony with God or through God with each other as in that idealised picture of Eden. We live in a world where almost every story, whether the big stories or the small personal ones, are to do with tension and problems, not harmony and peace. It is such a usual thing that without some kind of tension, unresolved or at length coming to a conclusion, there is no story to tell.

If you are asked about the story of your life – and it is always a good thing to look back along life's pathway and trace your story - some of you will have travelled far, some will have been in the same place more or less all your life, but the incidents which you will want to remember will be the things that have been unusual and difficult. You will remember incidents in your childhood which were not just days filled with love and routine – the time you were hospitalised; when your grandparent died; trouble you had at school. And you will remember how these things ended – well, or not so well. And so on through your life. There will be the golden days, or so I hope, but they will stand in relief against the more difficult times.

And the history of the world is a history of tension and of disputing factions and of war and of pestilence. And no one records the peaceful pleasant days. Likewise the stories on our news bulletins tend to be the stories of people facing difficulty. Individuals find their stories becoming common property on days when something hard has happened to them or around them. It doesn't make the news bulletins that Mrs X got up, had her breakfast and had a perfectly happy day with her grandchildren. That is not news, but such peaceful normality is the background against which news stories stand out.

The story of the world and of our lives is not one of constant peace with God or with one another, and it is because of that that the story of God is one of continual coming, coming to be with the people he has made and loves.

Advent is often seen as the season of light. We light the advent candles week by week. We hang lights in our homes and in our streets to decorate for Christmas. And of course in this northern hemisphere, and this northern part of the northern hemisphere, the lights mean so much more to us, because we are in the darkest time of the year, when people leave their homes to go to work in the dark and return in the dark, when lights are most needed and stand out. It is because of the darkness that we need light. In the same way, it is because we feel the lack of God that his coming to us is so important. It is when we see all that is wrong with the world and all that is wrong with our lives and the lives of the people we love that we cry out for God to come. The Advent promise is that God comes to us, comes in Jesus but comes again and again, because coming to us has always been God's pattern. God comes to us, he doesn't ask us first to come to him.

Both the beginning and the end of the Bible show that God takes pleasure in the people he has made. This is why God is always coming to us: because he loves us and wants to be with us. That is amazing. We look at humanity and though we see many good traits and people, we also see violence and greed and suffering inflicted by the strong on the weak, and humanity is such a mixed bag that it is hard to imagine anyone loving us indiscriminately. But God does. Of course, his love is not undiscerning. He wants us all to be the best we can be, to be what he made us to be: reflections of his goodness and love. But even when we fail in this – and let's face it, this is most of the time – God still loves us and wants to be with us, because being with us is how he can help us to change, and being with us is how he can help us to enjoy the life he has given us and be happy.

In our human lack of understanding we too often talk of needing to come to God. That lack of understanding could be founded on both humility and pride – humility that says I am not good enough, or pride that says I must make the first move. But we cannot come to God. God is so far above us, so different from us in essence and being, that we mortals cannot come to God. Not unless God first comes to us.

When God comes to us, we are lifted into life in his presence. This is what the picture in Revelation tells us. The picture there is of the new Jerusalem, made perfect and coming from heaven, the place of God to the new earth, the place of human beings. God comes to dwell in the midst of his people, giving them – us – light and presence and joy. And this is always what it means that God comes to us. Even in this, the first earth, God comes to his people to stay with us and bring us light and presence and joy.

At the beginning of this advent season, when the nights are long and dark and the mornings slow to dawn, think about the darkness without God. Think about what is wrong, with your life, or with the life of the world. We don't have to think for too long to get quite a comprehensive list. And then remember that God comes to us. God comes in Christ. God comes by his Spirit. God comes as a loving parent to support and guide us and as a shepherd to lead us and as a saviour to redeem and change us.

Let the wonder of God's coming flow over you.

For he did not have to come.

And he did not have to come in love.

He did not have to come to save and transform.

But he did. God came and God still comes to us, making the move that we cannot make of ourselves. Bringing the touch of his divine presence into the most mundane of situations. God comes when we are in distress and he comes when life is calm, coming to walk with us in the cool of the evening. God comes, and we, we surely must give thanks.

(Today we gather around the table to remember God's coming to us in Jesus, in his life, death and resurrection, and to allow God to come to us as we eat and drink the symbols of Christ's death. As you take the bread and the wine, remember that God comes to you, and give thanks.)