

28 November 2010

Advent 1A

Sermon notes:

Romans 13.11-14

Rev Dr Craig Thompson

*Let us then lay aside the works of
darkness and put on the armour of light.
Romans 13.12b*

Our Romans and Matthew readings today reflect the themes we meet on the first Sunday of Advent each year – the “end times” coming of the Son of Man. And so, as is usual with the first Sunday of Advent, our readings carry also a sense of *threat*. The gospel reading speaks of the “rapture” – the snatching away of one and the leaving behind of another, with the implied message being, take care that you are not the one left behind. “Wake up”, “Watch”, “Look out” seems to be the order of the day so far as the tenor of the readings goes. Once they were words of promise which filled believers with hope, for they awaited with longing the end times. Now, I suspect, most of us are not quite sure.

Whatever our enthusiasm for the end-time, I want to focus this morning on the moral teaching which Paul associates with the eager expectation of the church in his day. “Lay aside the works of darkness”, Paul exhorts, and he lists among these works such things as drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarreling and jealousy (13.13). It might seem clear what he means here, but the meaning or intention of such an exhortation changes if the expectation of the times itself changes.

If you believe that indeed the end is nigh, then the types of change Paul talks about here are a matter of *preparation*, of getting up to speed with how things soon will be. Paul encourages the Roman Christians to clothe themselves in the armour of light, to live as if it were day because it soon *will* be day. Moral action here is about the destiny of the world and of ourselves as part of it.

If, however, the expectation of the end disappears – perhaps, as is easy enough for us, because of the simple passage of time – then the moral teaching takes on a different character. It becomes much more about us and about general rules of good and bad behaviour which prevail in our particular time. But for Paul the point is that our actions *speak*, and make a declaration about the nature of the times we live in and, in particular, about the presence or absence of God.

Or, to put it a little differently and to re-connect with our thinking from last week, we might interpret sin as the sign of impatience – and an impatience with *God*, in particular. The clearest biblical illustration of this is the events which took place at the foot of Mount Sinai during the time when Moses was on that holy mountain, receiving the law of God. Tired of waiting for Moses to return, the Israelites turn to his brother Aaron to make for them a god to worship. The result of this was the creation of the golden calf, and the declaration that this calf was the god who had brought the people out of Egypt (Exodus 32).

This is more than a story about the moral or religious failure of the Israelites. It serves as a symbol for all sin, not simply as idolatry – dealing with the wrong thing as God – but also as impatience with the God who does matter. It is impatience with our situation which causes us to wander into the territory of sin. Impatience with our partners opens up the way into infidelity; impatience with the needs or demands of another leads us to violence against him; impatience with not having causes us to overextend our finances, or simply to take what is not ours.

Last week we looked at impatience as the exercise of strength or power to force the changes in the world we desire. Impatience reads the times in which we live as empty of meaning, unless we fill it with something. Not having what I need or desire, I can act to fill the times myself in dishonesty or infidelity, or whatever. Sin declares the times empty of God, that there is nothing to *wait* for, and that all that matters are things we are to *take*. Sin, then, is the expression of a kind of hopelessness, or of despair – but perhaps a secret, unspoken or even unrecognised despair. It declares the absence of God and builds a golden calf of one kind or another to fill in the space where we think God ought to have been. Something is missing, and we fill it with chocolate, or new shoes or internet porn or a bigger car, or whatever. If our time really is empty, and God is neither present nor coming, then these options are simply that – options, with no values on them other than simply their price tag. There is not wrong or right here, no reason for saying yes or no to anything other than whether or not it appeals to us personally.

From a Christian perspective, then, sin arises from the secret despair that there is no point in waiting, that our times are not moving towards anything new and so are only what *we* make of them. There is, here, no virtue in patience but only wasted opportunity for self-realisation. But Paul tells a different story, and so his exhortation to a particular kind of living is not about what is right or what is wrong, but about the nature of our times. This *is* a time of waiting. It is not,

then, a time of simple self-realisation. That we cannot fully realise the things we need – that we must wait for them to be realised for us – is symbolised by not all things being options for us in our personal behaviour. The despairing soul which hopes for nothing has all options open to him – if he also has the power to realise them. But the patient soul does not, for she sees her time as darkness before the dawn, and prepares herself for the dawn.

Recalling our thinking from last week, it may or may not be the case that patience is a virtue, but it is certainly the case that *virtue is patience*, for the godly life testifies to things not yet seen, lives as in the day though it is still dark, and awaits the dawn.

The godly life is a patient life which awaits a day yet to come, and so it seeks now to discern the difference between light and dark, between what really matters and what are merely passing shadows.

“Now is the time to wake up from sleep”, Paul declares, “for the night is far gone, and the day is at hand. “Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light”, becoming beacons by which the world might see, and better understand what we human beings are created to be. Let us work and strive for the things reflect that full humanity, and be patient for those things which are God’s own work.

By the grace of God, may such a patience and life of testimony be ours, to our greater humanity and God’s greater glory. Amen.