

## ADVENT 1 C BIRKENHEAD 2018

The poet T S Eliot says in his poem the Four Quartets, "In my beginning is my end". He develops this theme and then inverts the words. In my end is my beginning. These were also the words used by Mary Queen of Scots. In my end is my beginning. For both Mary and Eliot the simple message is that beginnings and endings belong together. One leads into the other.

Advent, the beginning of a new Church year, is the time to prepare for Christmas. Not the Christmas of jollification. It is the preparation of our celebration of God in our midst in the person of Jesus. This is quite a different celebration. Strangely, as we celebrate the beginning of God in our midst in the person of Jesus, we look at the end of time. The return of Christ and the end of the world are the themes at the beginning of Advent. What we see in the beginning, we will also see in the end. As we see God coming to us at the beginning of Jesus life, so we will see God coming to us at the end of time in the return of Christ.

The end of time has been a certain theme over the past couple of weeks. It's as if the church wants to tell us how important this end time is. People are always fascinated with the end of the world. There are always people who want to predict the end of the world. There have been many such predictions over the years. But Jesus tells us we do not know when it will happen. The only thing we need to concern ourselves with is that God will be at the end, as God was at the beginning, and is present now.

Some people say that the end has already happened in the person of Jesus. They tell us we are living in the end time. Others say the end time is our death; others that the end is a cosmic event on a grand scale.

The New Testament is not clear in its details about the end, nor about the return of Christ. Three things are very clear:

The first is that Jesus will return. This is a constant theme of the preaching of the early church. Secondly We cannot know when it will happen. Thirdly we must always be ready.

Paul was convinced Jesus would return in his lifetime. He had to change his view of when the return would happen but it still dominated his thought and action. It was Jesus return that sparked Paul into action. The missionary journeys of Paul were the result of his desire that many should know Christ before his return.

The same thing happened around the year 1000. There was much speculation about the end of the world and the return of Jesus. What did the people do then. Well they built churches, established hospitals, religious communities and places of learning. They spent much time and energy proclaiming the Christian faith by making their society a better place to live. This was done simply out of a desire to be ready for Christ's return.

I suppose for most of us we tend not to think too much about the end of the world or the second coming of Jesus. Advent is the time when our readings don't let us forget it. Here at our beginning, we are reminded of the end. How on earth are we to take these things into account in our lives.

First I think we are asked to live with a sense of responsibility. The readings all stress things like honesty, integrity, and an increase in love. Responsible living shows we take seriously the coming of Christ. Responsible living is our attempt to care for others as well as for ourselves. We do this simply to be prepared. When we come to our end, it will reflect our beginning.

As we move into the Christmas season, let us not get so single-mindedly over-preparing for Christmas that we forget God's vision for the world -- a vision that is God's to control, a vision that is far broader and more expansive than either/or thinking can allow. What is at stake is not just

another annual celebration or making Christmas memories with friends and family. What is at stake is the coming of the kingdom of heaven, which, Jesus reminds us, is both already and not yet here.

The other thing I think is asked of us is to live with a sense of expectancy. To live with the second coming in mind is to live with hope. The end will be like the beginning. What we make of life now will be what we make of it at the end.

So our end and our beginning are one and the same thing. One leads into the other.

TS Eliot again:

The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and to know the place for the first time.