

**The Cathedral Church of the Redeemer**  
**The First Sunday of Advent, year 'C'**  
**29 November, 2009**  
**The Rev'd Leighton Lee**

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Advent is a season of paradox. In 1997 the well-known English composer John Tavener wrote an Advent anthem entitled *Fear and Rejoice* for the famed choir of St. John's College, Cambridge, whose text, drawn from the Psalms, the Gospels, and the Orthodox liturgy, speaks of the tensions of the season of Advent: expectation and fulfilment; solemnity and exultation; fear and rejoicing. The season is characterized by anticipation, by hope (even longing), and by preparation. And although the cry of the final hymn of this morning's service, 'Come, Lord, Come,' may put us in mind of the church festooned for Christmas and the baby in the crib, this is not the focus of the hymn – or even of the season. The cry, 'Come, Lord, Come,' is a plea for Christ's return – his second coming if you will – to judge the world.

But this image, this plea, presents us with a problem. You and I assume that the second coming is a preoccupation of a certain kind of evangelical type. And no doubt this type exists in large numbers. Who else do you think ensured that the *Left Behind* series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins became a world-wide best-selling phenomenon? And make no mistake: these novels are filled with the kind of wooden, literalist, hell-fire and brimstone depictions of the last days that most of us find ludicrous and risible. (I myself have long suggested that these novels should be treasured for their camp value if for no other reason. It takes a brazen author to write in deadly earnest scenes like the following: Rayford Steele, the pilot of a 747, who has reneged on his promise to be a better Christian, is on the verge of having an affair with his senior flight attendant when he suddenly finds half his crew and passengers 'raptured' while on an overnight transatlantic flight.)

Perhaps the reason why you and I resist thinking or speaking about the end of time (or *Parousia*, to give it its scholarly name) isn't that we find a certain evangelical style of life embarrassing, but that we find it hard to embrace the idea of God's future, for we are creatures who so often are tied to the past; so often we do not live in anticipation, but in memory. We suffer under the tyranny of the past, though it so often seems like comfort: 'the good old days' and 'the way things used to be'. We obsess about the past: we nurse past wounds; we feed past anxieties and fears; we surrender to past doubts. The saddest kinds of people in the world are those who have never gotten over some slight, some wound – perceived or actual – and who, as a consequence are forever poisoned. The effect of such an obsession – such an *idée fixe* as the French would say – on anyone's personal life is bad enough. The effect on the life of a larger society is always devastating and destructive.

Too often, however, I think we see the acceptance of the future as an 'all or nothing' kind of proposition: either we embrace the future in all its fullness and leave everything that is the past behind, or we reject even taking one step forward and cling desperately to the

decayed detritus of earlier times, thought and people. But are these the only alternatives? Or is there a third possibility?

Well, of course, there is a third, and this act of worship points to that reality too. It is in the Eucharist where past and future, promise and fulfilment are joined in perfect harmony. When you hear these words in a moment:

“Father, we now celebrate the memorial of our redemption. Recalling Christ’s death and descent among the dead, proclaiming his resurrection and ascension to your right hand, awaiting his coming again in glory, and offering to you, from the gifts you have given us, this bread and this cup, we praise you and we bless you”

you will be hearing the Church’s act of – another professional theologians’ word – *anamnesis*, which is a vital recall of the past into the present, a commemoration and a re-presenting of Christ. And though in this sense the Eucharist looks back, it even more, and more importantly, looks forward to the day which is promised in the Eucharist: the day of God, the coming of the Kingdom, the claiming by Christ of the future. When we come to the table of God’s glorious forgiveness, we come in commemoration of our Lord Christ’s action done once for all in the past, yes, but also in expectation of the fulfilment of which that perfect action was a pledge and foretaste. It is the only kind of nostalgia we should indulge in, for it is not vain, or self-serving, or even scrubbed of past imperfections. It is a vehicle by which we may with confidence journey through a world of uncertainty into an uncertain future. Our partaking of the sacrament is an act of faith and courage for the future. By this we say that we will not be hostage to the past but will live for tomorrow even as today we celebrate our redemption.

“The past,” said L. P. Hartley, “is another country.” And that is true. And the future becomes the past with alarming rapidity. All that remains for us is the future, the glorious, frightening, unknowable and undiscovered future of which Advent is a symbol and signifier. Even now our Advent hope is that the light of world is about to dawn upon us, and in that light’s dawning we may leave what lies behind and embrace what is ahead with confidence and with joy.