

*“Slouching towards Bethlehem” (after Luke 21: 25-36)*

“Lo, he comes with clouds descending” is a magnificent hymn to sing and an equal amount of fun to play on the organ. But what fearsome, threatening and dire words! The editors of our modern hymnbook, worried by the hymn’s fearsome imagery, have toned it down and replaced the original description of Christ “robed in dreadful majesty” with “robed in glorious majesty,” but they have left us “deeply wailing” when Christ appears in judgement.

This is Wesley’s Advent hymn when the traditional concerns of Advent in church were the coming of Christ, heaven and hell, judgement and death. We use Advent differently now. Erecting Christmas trees, preparing children’s nativity plays and practising carols are a little bit more fun!

Still, though, the lectionary gives us an apocalyptic passage from St Luke for today’s gospel reading. We can’t get to the angels, shepherds and wise men just yet. It’s signs in the sun, moon and stars,  
distress among the nations,  
people fainting from fear because the powers of the heavens are shaking

and the coming of the Son of Man in a cloud with power and glory that concern Luke in this chapter.

Luke was not alone. The main preoccupation of Luke’s contemporaries was the end of the world. In New Testament times, the first Christians lived in full expectation of the imminent return of Christ; they believed Jesus would come again in their lifetime. But the end of the world didn’t come. Generation after generation came and went and the Christian expectation of Christ’s return waned.

The end of the world is a contemporary concern once more. When I was younger, nuclear war threatened to obliterate the world we knew and there were government information films advising citizens what to do when the nuclear button was pressed. Now there’s a different set of worries. Governments and scientists meet tomorrow in Paris for a UN conference to discuss how to avoid the end of the world through climate change, and people also see that what might bring the world to an end is infections’ resistance to antibiotics or terrorism’s attacks on

civilisation. People can see **how** the world might end. And it's played out in some of the most popular Hollywood films where apocalypse is entertaining – the Hunger Games, Mad Max, The Planet of the Apes and the Matrix, to name only a few. Check Wikipedia and you will see that there have been almost as many apocalyptic films made since 2000 as were made in the fifty years before. The end of the world **is** a current concern.

What do Christians make of that? Will Christ come again?

The ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, made the astute observation that every story, every good drama, every well-constructed plot has a beginning, a middle and an end. And what goes for a narrative in a book and a drama on stage can also be said to go for the great human drama, the great metanarrative of human history and the Christian story. Our beginning was in Eden and Bethlehem; we now live in the mid times, the middle ages; and our end will be when Christ comes. But, how?

Let me describe and bring together several scenarios from history, literature and music to move towards a way of understanding this gospel theme that might work for you in this scientific, modern age.

In 1919, the world was emerging from the nearest it had even been to an apocalyptic experience:

    millions had died in the most brutal warfare carried out in devastated fields turned to mud;

        millions more had been bereaved, permanently maimed or displaced;

            after that, a flu epidemic claimed the lives of even more than had been killed in the war.

Half a generation had been wiped out, whole cultures lay devastated leaving surviving citizens stunned, scarred and scared. That's when the Irish poet W B Yeats wrote the poem printed in today's service sheet. He was asking whether he was living in the end times:

    Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
    Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
    The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming!

This is a disturbing poem, especially for Christians, for, arising from the apocalypse comes the nightmarish image of a rough beast, not a beautiful baby in a manger, not a Christ in glory, but a rough beast slouching towards Bethlehem to be born. This chilling last line of the poem makes us ask what kind of God comes to us.

It was in similar times that God first came to us in Jesus. When we come to celebrate the Christmas story, we will think of a world on the move as families were uprooted for the census and as a Roman imperial army settled down and ruled Palestine. We will think of a terrorised world, as Herod's henchmen marched through the streets slaughtering innocents, causing the holy family to flee for the safety of Egypt. Things were falling apart. And another poet, Elizabeth Jennings, simply said of the world Jesus came to, "their whole world is troubled." She looked forward to the celebration of Christmas when we will "think of a story that is old yet new each year" and then we will marvel "How God took time and entered history."<sup>1</sup>

In 1944, war was raging on the streets of Paris and the composer Olivier Messiaen sheltered from the fighting in his house. As the noise of battle was heard in the streets around him, he composed a suite of twenty pieces for solo piano dedicated to his wife. Each piece was a contemplation on the infant Jesus – *Vingt regards sur l'enfant-Jésus*. The composer's home was surrounded by war and the Christ-child was with him.

This is not to say that we must be in troubled times for Christ to come to us, (far from it!), but it is to say that if we are there, Christ may come.

Among the folk songs we sang as children in school in the north east of England was a song of wish-fulfilment. A mother in a poor home, waiting for her man to bring the wages home, dandled her child on her knee and sang:

*Dance ti' thy daddy, sing ti' thy mammy,  
Dance ti' thy daddy, ti' thy mammy sing;*

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<sup>1</sup> In *Christmas Sequence* from *Times and Seasons* p. 28

*Thou shall hev a fishy on a little dishy,  
Thou shall hev a fishy when the boat comes in.*

When times are hard, people dream of times when the boats will come in.

And, in one of Iris Murdoch's novels which reworks Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son (*The Good Apprentice*), one of the characters waits for the arrival of Jesse. He looks for him and longs for him. Only to find that he had always been there, hiding away.

In Advent, we journey towards Bethlehem – with Mary and Joseph, with the Baptist and with the prophets who prepared the way – and while we journey, we find Another comes towards us to meet us, One who has always already been there. Whether or not we are nearer the end time than ever before,

whether or not the kingdom is any nearer than it was,  
Christ comes to us in the here and now and, in coming to us, comes as judge and friend.

Jesus' parable of the fig tree in today's gospel reading – buds on the branches are signs that summer is near – encourages us to watch for signs of Christ not in some far distant future glory but, just as really, imminently here and now.