

And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh.

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Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!

Maybe you remember the scene.

Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain! The Great Oz has spoken!

Dorothy and the Tin Man and the Scarecrow and the Cowardly Lion have completed the task that the Wizard of Oz had given them to do. They come back with the Wicked Witch's broom; and they ask for the rewards they'd been promised for that work. But the Wizard tells them not to be so hasty. He must first think about it. Obviously, he had not expected such an outcome. And he uses all of the devices that he has to put them off: flashes of smoke and light; and fire and flame; and the great thundering of his voice. To threaten them. To scare them. To fill their hearts with terror and fear. But they will have none of that. They argue. They plead. But only more thunder and bluster; more fire and flame; more terror and intimidation. Until Toto wanders off to a small alcove; and pulls back the curtain to reveal a small man yelling into a microphone; twisting and twirling a great number of buttons and wheels. And the great and powerful Wizard is revealed to be nothing more than just an ordinary man; a simple man with no great powers at all; a good man, as he says of himself; but a very poor wizard. The curtain is drawn back. Reality comes into focus; and the picture becomes clear. That's what Jesus is doing in this week's Gospel. He's pulling back the curtain. He's taking off the cover.¹

There shall be signs in the sun and in the moon and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; ...hearts failing ... for fear ...for the powers of the heavens shall be shaken,

He's speaking in the everyday language of destruction and disorder; of suffering and sorrow; the everyday language that fills humanity's long sad story. He's speaking not just of the disorder of our disordered relationships; of human violence and oppression. That's the story that we see so often in the pages of Holy Scriptures; as well as in our lives.

That's the story that lies behind this week's Old Testament reading; a story which unfolds after centuries and centuries of disorder and destruction; the people of God suffering over and over again; all because they had forgotten to put their hope in God; all because, somewhere along the way, they'd forgotten the Law; they'd forgotten all that God had done for them; they'd forgotten his great work of rescue and salvation; and the relationship of faith and trust to which they'd been called. Somewhere along the way, they'd come to put their trust in other things; in their own power, for example; in the weapons of violence and bloodshed; in other gods. And the story that lies behind this week's story, the story of the discovery of the Law, is as sad as any story we read;

¹ ἀποκάλυψις from ἀποκαλύπτω

from ἀπό (a primary particle; "off", that is, away (from something near) and καλύπτω (to cover up (literally or figuratively): - cover, hide.): to take off the cover, that is, disclose: - reveal.

disclosure: - appearing, coming, lighten, manifestation, be revealed, revelation.

Abijah; Asa; Jehosaphat; Jehoram; one king after another, century after century; Joash; Amaziah; Uzziah; Jotham; Ahaz; one year after year; one reign after another; a long, virtually unrelenting saga of suffering and sadness; of war and violence; one killed in battle; others killed by their own officials; a litany of failure and disappointment. All because they'd put their trust in the kinds of things that could not be trusted.

And that's where Jesus picks up the story; reminding us that not only are human relationships out of order; but the whole creation is out of order; and that we cannot even put our trust in the kinds of things that might seem trustworthy and true, like the sun and the moon and the stars, the sea and the waves, because they too are out of order. And while that ought to be the cause of great terror, 'hearts failing ... for fear,' Jesus tells us that it is precisely in those moments when the ground beneath us falls away; precisely in those moments when the very things that we thought would always be reliable fail us, that we should not despair; that we should not give up; but that we should, instead, lift up our heads. Because our redemption is drawing near.

This week's Gospel reminds us of the disorder of our broken world: something that we see every day. But we are also reminded that in the midst of all of this disorder that there is hope, in Christ alone. That the Christ who first came as our Saviour has promised to come again, in power and glory.

So Advent for us is a season of hope; of longing and listening for the hope that God has planted in every heart. Advent is a time to light the lamps; to scatter the darkness; and not just cower in fear. In the words of the Collect for Advent, it's a time to "cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light." A time to rise above the bitterness and negativity and quarrelling in which humanity so easily wallows and to renew the commitment made at our baptism to walk in love and light.

In Advent we renew our hope: our hope for salvation; our hope for deliverance from all that binds us and worries us; in a world that is all too unworthy of our hope, our hope for a humanity healed and renewed. So Advent is a reminder that God has a plan that is unfolding even if we cannot always see how; because Christ has pulled back the curtain and shown us the love that lies at the heart of all things. And because of that, Advent is a time to be quiet; a season to step back, if only for a moment: to read scripture; to pray; and to listen. Advent is a time to take stock of what really matters; and, even, for letting go of those things that don't really matter.

Advent is all of that and more; and it arises from the realisation that life doesn't have to be this way; that in God's plan there's something better for us; and that allowing the Incarnate Christ to enter into every moment of our lives is the key for living into that plan. And Advent tells us most assuredly that we are not forgotten; that when we feel that the darkness is more than we can handle; when we're too tired to go on, Advent tells us that God is going to act. That's the claim of Holy Scripture. That God will act to preserve and protect all those who look to him and hope in him and trust in him. And because we know that; because we know deeply within our hearts that Christ is always with us, we can walk and live and love and hope in a light which all the darkness of a very dark world can never put out.

Whatever things were written aforetime were written for our learning; that we through patience and [the] comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.