

We are so used to having four Gospels packaged into our Bibles that it can be a shock to realize that the various early Christian communities almost certainly knew and would have read from only one of them. That would have been especially true in Mark's community, because the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John had not yet been written!

As we take up Mark's Gospel in the Advent season, we discover that it does not mention Jesus' origin. Jesus appears in Mark Chapter 1 as an adult, and immediately begins his public ministry. If we had only Mark's Gospel to go by, we would not be celebrating Christmas, because Mark and his community seem neither to have known nor cared about how or when Jesus was born. It makes a problem for the lectionary compilers this year of the 3-year cycle: what Scripture to read during Advent?

An article in *Christianity Today* by Elesha Coffman opens with these words, "It's very tough for us North Americans to imagine Mary and Joseph trudging to Bethlehem in anything but, as Christina Ro[ss]etti memorably described it, "the bleak mid-winter," surrounded by "snow on snow on snow." To us, Christmas and December are inseparable. But for the first three centuries of Christianity, Christmas wasn't in December—or on the calendar anywhere. If observed at all, the celebration of Christ's birth was usually lumped in with Epiphany (January 6), one of the church's earliest established feasts"—with the Magi rather than the shepherds and angels as the first to visit and recognize the infant Jesus.

No-one knows the actual date of Christ's birth. December 25 was first officially observed as the date in 336, after Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the favoured religion in the Western Empire. Christianity co-opted and then replaced two Roman holidays around the date of the winter solstice: *Natalis Solis Invicti* (rebirth of the invincible sun), and Saturnalia, a week-long orgy of parties, gift-giving, and gambling – foreshadowing the modern consumer-oriented holiday season by 2000 years!

Advent literally means 'coming' but it also implies waiting. Early Christians associated Advent mainly with waiting for the Second Coming of Jesus and a Last Judgement. Mark addresses Judgement Day in Chapter 13, from which we read today. This recapitulates (briefly!) what we have been reading for several weeks in Matthew's Gospel – the idea of keeping awake to be ready for Judgement Day. There is an irony in juxtaposing the symbol of the Christ-child – a fragile, helpless human baby born in a stable – with the mighty judge coming in clouds of glory. Luke, perhaps the New Testament's greatest story-teller, married waiting for the Incarnation with the expectancy of Mary's pregnancy. St. John called Jesus the Light of the World, befitting the short days and long nights of the season in the northern hemisphere. The image of waiting for the light to shine once again picks up the theme of *Natalis Solis Invicti*, with its promise that the days would once again lengthen out, and spring would return.

Today's readings for our Advent Lessons and Carols are taken from the Old Testament. They show the Israelites' hope for a coming Messiah, the "One anointed by God". The people of Israel looked forward to a new beginning. The Messiah would be a divine Mr. Fix-it, whose work would bring a theological reboot, so that the world would be run according to God's divine plan. We began with Jeremiah, who prophesied that God would make a new covenant with his people Israel. The old

covenant was given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and set down in detail by Moses. It would be better than the old covenant, for the Mosaic law was written on scrolls, but the new one was to be written in the peoples' hearts. Jeremiah's prophesy mirrors Jesus' teaching (which got him into trouble with the authorities for his insistence that the spirit is more important than the letter of the law) – because it is written in the heart.

Christians have repeatedly searched in the Hebrew Scriptures for predictions that Jesus would come. Thus this morning we read the prophesy that a virgin (actually, a young girl of marriageable age) would conceive and bear a son, and name him Immanuel (meaning, God is with us). The historical King Ahaz had been challenged to ask God to give a sign about the future. Ahaz said that it would be blasphemous to ask that of God, and Isaiah provided the sign instead to the descendants of King David. [We do not know anything about the young woman in question.] In the same way, the prophet Micah predicted that the one to rule in Israel, presumably the Messiah, would come forth from Bethlehem.

Perhaps the most significant for our hopes for Advent and Christmas is the passage from Isaiah that my Bible calls *The Glorious New Creation*. It prefigures the line from the hymn *Turn back, O Man, forswear thy foolish ways*, which goes 'Now, even now, once more from earth to sky, peals forth in joy man's old undaunted cry, "Earth shall be fair, and all her folk be one."' Isaiah foresaw no more sadness when the Messiah comes, no infant mortality nor premature death, housing for all, no exploitation; even enemies symbolized by wolves and lambs, lions and cattle, would live together in peace. Luke captured this hope in his Christmas story, "Peace on earth and goodwill to all people." As we listen each week to our prayer leaders at St George's, we hear the same hope expressed: we pray for the hungry, the poor, the sick, and the homeless in the world around us; we pray for an end to violence and intolerance in war-torn countries. Even with widening inequality and unfairness in today's world, and polarization between those of different political persuasions, we still hold to the same hope that animated Isaiah – one day it will all be better.

By the time Jesus was born, this longing for a brighter age had developed into belief that things had gotten so bad that God must step in and begin a new age of justice and fairness. But when Jesus came, he was not the kind of Messiah that most people were looking for. He did not raise a successful revolt against the Romans. Just too much of that stuff about peace and love! He didn't tell people to refuse to pay taxes to Rome, but instead, "Give Caesar what is Caesar's, and give God what is God's." He must have been a big disappointment to those who had been waiting in hope for a more 'muscular' Messiah.

Perhaps the Jewish peoples' high expectations were unrealistic, and are unrealistic today. I find myself returning to the same old trope – we cannot hope to change the world at large, but we can make a difference to the people with whom we interact in our daily lives – family, friends, neighbours, strangers. So perhaps our task this Advent season is to make our waiting realistic. My sense of 'diminished expectations' is that Jesus is unlikely to come in clouds of glory in late December 2017. I actually believe that Jesus has already come, and calls us to bring the Kingdom of Heaven closer. It is instead that as we begin to reflect upon the birth of the fragile human baby, we might think of how the Messiah might dwell in our hearts (to use Isaiah's idiom), so that we try to make this world closer to the Kingdom of God, the task that God has set for us. But whatever symbols seem to make the most sense to you, may this waiting time of Advent be a holy and blessed time for each of us at St. George's.