

3rd SUNDAY BEFORE ADVENT

2010

Sermon preached by Canon Ray Nichols

Job 19.25 2 Thessalonians 2.1-3

Have you ever lived close to a clock tower? Our first house in a Liverpool parish was right opposite the clock tower of St Katherine's Teacher Training College. I remember my father-in-law visiting us for the first time and saying, as he walked in the door "You'll get no sleep with that thing opposite".

20 years later we moved into the Rectory at Dorchester-on-Thames. The house is in the grounds of the Abbey and at the bottom of the garden is a huge square 16th Century tower with a ring of 8 massive bells and a striking, chiming clock that employs every one of them. And all no more than a stone's throw from the main bedroom window. The hourly strike and the chime every quarter were the first thing our visitors noticed. As for us, in a week or two we scarcely noticed it – indeed for 13 years we rather enjoyed it. The striking and chiming mechanism was a fascinating piece of machinery. Unlike so many church clocks it had not been electrified and still operated mechanically. If you stood near it you would be startled suddenly by a series of noises followed by a whirring sound. That is the beginning of a cycle which has been set in motion and which will come to completion when the hammers strike the bells and the great strike and the chimes ring out.

Someone has likened the time between the life, death and resurrection of Christ on the one hand – and the final Coming of Christ and His Kingdom, to the interval between the whirring of a clock's mechanism and the striking of the hour. The process which God began in the first coming of Christ is moving inevitably to its conclusion, in what is traditionally called His Second Coming – the final denouement. Once the clock whirring has started you know that it must lead inevitably to the strike.

Advent is the season in which we are called to remember that the process has begun – we are living in the "clock-whirring" period. We may not know **when** the hour will strike – but we have no doubt at all that strike it will.

From the moment that God acted in history through the incarnation of Christ, the clock began to whirr. We know that God's ultimate purpose and victory over the powers of darkness is certain. Nothing can stop the establishment of His Kingdom. We know that the final hour of God's rule will strike. We can sing "Our God Reigns" with a sure confidence and a sure hope. But like those first disciples and the early Church there was one big question - "**When?**" "When are you going to establish your

kingdom?" the disciples asked. "You've done all the work. You've triumphed over the worst that man can do. Now – when can we see the practical outcome of your victory?"

And after the Ascension the young Church waited. St Paul in his travels and his letters to the Churches had to deal with this question. "About dates and times, my friends, we need not write to you" - the clock is whirring – the machinery is in action – the process has begun. "You know perfectly well that the Day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night".

If we do not know the hour, there is **no** time when it might **not** come. We can't say, because it won't happen yet we need not concern ourselves for the time being – it is clearly not urgent.

In the New Testament there are two words for time. One is CHRONOS, from which, of course, we get our chronometer, chronological etc. It refers to the purely human passage of minutes, hours, months, years, by which we order our lives. God is outside it and is not bound by it. ("A thousand ages in thy sight are like an evening gone, short as the watch that ends the night, before the rising sun") Chronos is not a meaningful concept in the counsels of God and in the coming of His Kingdom.

That may be difficult to grasp but we get into all sorts of theological tangles if we put God in **our** time sequence. C.S.Lewis has a helpful illustration of the point. - A novelist is writing in his study and has his main character walking down the street, approaching the front door of a house and knocking. Just at that moment the novelist's wife calls him to lunch. When he returns to his study after lunch his hero is still knocking at the front door! The fact is, the author is not in the same time sequence as the characters in his novel. He is not controlled by or subject to that timing. He lives outside it.

So God is not controlled by or subject to our earthly clock and calendar. **He does not look back to yesterday or forward to tomorrow.** He lives in an eternal NOW.

The other New Testament word used for "time" is KAIROS. This has nothing to do with hours, days, years – it is **the moment of opportunity** that faces us. When St Paul urges his readers to be alert and on tip-toe, this is the word that he uses - "Now is the time – Now is the KAIROS – to awake out of sleep" - now is the significant and appropriate opportunity.

It isn't that it is urgent to be alert and to follow Christ faithfully because **time** is short – but because the call to do so is the call to seize the opportunity of the moment. The passage of time doesn't make it more or less important – it is important by its very nature. Henry Cotton, asked which is the most important shot in a round of golf, said "The one you are

about to make". Its importance is not determined by the point at which it comes during the round, but by the nature of the game. As you take the club out of the bag it's **this** one, **this** shot, **this** moment.

Despite our preoccupation with **when** it's going to happen, there are, if we look carefully, some signs which indicate its approach.

In our clock tower, suddenly the whirring stops, there's a clanking of levers and a clicking of ratchets – not a strike – but you know that it's not far off.

"Portents will appear" said Jesus. "Nations will stand helpless, men will faint, the celestial powers will be shaken. When all this begins to happen stand upright and hold your heads high, because your liberation is near". Jesus wasn't trying to frighten his friends by his apocalyptic language – he was encouraging them. It is language like nothing before. It breaks all known categories. When the material is taken up into the spiritual, the historical merges into the eternal. Jesus is saying "There is nothing to fear – I **have** come to you, and I **will** come. I am **with** you even to the end of time."

Advent is a reminder that there is a **Kairos** in all our lives – a moment when a door opens – when God suddenly becomes more real and there is a window of opportunity – NOW is that time. It may be you've been thinking of saying a deeper YES to Christ for a long time. It is a moment of crisis – a Kairos – an Advent window of opportunity, when you are being called to make a bigger commitment than you've ever made before. It's an opportunity for you. When? NOW is the time.

7.11.10

R.M.N.