

ON SINGING AND LONG WORDS¹

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh in St James' Church,
King Street, Sydney, on the First Sunday of Advent, 3 December 2017**

I should begin by wishing you all a happy new church year. Today is Advent Sunday and we begin a new round in our liturgical life. We begin Year B, which means that we read from St Mark's gospel. One of the great things about a change of liturgical season is that we may have the opportunity to sing the hymns reserved for that time. In Advent, we have a range of traditional hymns that begins with "O come, O come Emmanuel". This hymn is a metrical version of a series of advent antiphons, each of which begins with the exclamation "O". The antiphons themselves possibly date from the 6th century. The metrical version that we use is a translation of a Latin original, which dates from 1710. The Gregorian tune, *Veni Emmanuel*, is from the 15th century.²

Historically later is "Wachet auf", "Wake, O wake", a hymn written by 16th century Lutheran pastor, Phillip Nicolai, who also composed the tune.³ We sing it to a harmonised version by J S Bach, who incorporated both tune and words into his Cantata BWV 140.⁴

I can't omit Charles Wesley's "Lo! He comes with clouds descending", first published in 1758. We still sing it to the tune to which the Wesley brothers set it. Originally called *Olivers*, after its composer Thomas Olivers, it was later called *Helmsley*, by which name we now know it. Our hymns cover a significant period of Christian hymnody.

Mentioning the Advent hymns is not just self-indulgence, pleasant though the mention is. The word "advent" means "coming" and is usually reserved for an arrival that is notable in some way. The hymns alert us to the fact that, although Advent is in preparation for Christmas, it is not about Christmas. The coming event on which we focus is not the Incarnation but that much more challenging topic of the "second coming". This gives me the opportunity to use two strange theological words, a temptation no academic could resist. They are: "apocalypse" and "eschatology".

"Eschatology" is that part of Christian theology that refers to the "last things", identified as "death, judgement, heaven, and hell". I only have to mention these terms to cause you to realise how difficult and divisive a subject eschatology might be. We will all die, but the nature of death is unknown, if we suppose that there is something beyond it. We all have experience of the death of others but that experience is limited to our own reactions to it. If we extend beyond death to "judgement, heaven, and hell", we enter into a difficult debate. We must use images taken from what we know to describe that which we do not know. We run the risk of taking the images too literally. As we ourselves approach death, do we do so in an atmosphere of hope or fear? If our approach is one of fear, do we develop a life focused on that fearful future or on the love of God and our neighbours here and now?

I do not intend to answer any of these questions today, except to note that the theologian, C H Dodd, coined the term "realised eschatology" to tempt us away from such fruitless concentration on life after death. He pointed out how frequently Jesus spoke of his kingdom

¹ Readings: Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O_Come,_O_Come,_Emmanuel and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O_Antiphons

³ https://hymnary.org/person/Nicolai_P

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wachet_auf_ruft_uns_die_Stimme,_BWV_140

being already here. Not without criticism from other scholars, Dodd sought to see a kingdom that was both here now and yet unfulfilled. Thus, he created a balance between present and future.

The word “apocalypse” means “revelation”. The last book of the New Testament, which we know as “Revelation” is called in Greek Ἀποκάλυψις. Apocalypse is a literary form that was common in the period of Jewish history surrounding the exile in Babylon and through into the New Testament period. The book of Daniel is an Old Testament example. Speaking of the New Testament book, Revelation, biblical scholar, Richard Baukham, says that

... apocalypses are a literature which deploys the theological imagination to draw its readers into different ways of seeing things. It speaks to a world whose imaginative view of the world is controlled by the power and propaganda of the dominant political and economic system. By envisaging the same world from the perspective of God’s kingdom ... Revelation liberates its readers from the dominant world-view.⁵

Philip Alexander says:

The style of apocalyptic is highly distinctive. The texts are full of fantastic and arresting images—strange beasts, surreal landscapes, portents, prodigies, and wonders. They have at times a nightmarish quality, and, indeed, are often presented as dream- or trance-visions. ... The visions are elaborate allegories: the imagery has symbolic meaning and its details are worked out with great precision and care.⁶

We can now see how it all works. Take the book of Daniel. The Hebrews were in captivity to the most powerful force in their region. Everything they experienced was controlled by that regime. The visions in this book operated to free them from that dominance. Through codes that were understood only within their own circle, the book subverted the dominant view and suggested that there was a better future, one that was linked to an overall plan of God. If you want to know how these people felt, and why Daniel might have been so effective, read again this morning’s passage from Isaiah, which was written in that same period and to the same people.

Similarly, the early Christians were suffering persecution from the power of the Roman Empire. Revelation also subverted the dominant discourse through its coded message.

It’s not surprising that we might be somewhat afraid of dealing with apocalyptic Biblical literature. We are unfamiliar with style and, more importantly, the code. There is a history of literal interpretations that has appropriated the original for new purposes. For example, the “whore of Babylon” in Revelation, originally meaning the Roman Empire, became, to later Protestants, the Church of Rome. Others unwisely use the book to predict the exact date on which the world will end.

All this brings us, at last, to this morning’s gospel reading. It ends a discourse in which Jesus talks about the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be ... then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; someone on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to

⁵ Richard Baukham, “Revelation”, in John Barton and John Muddiman, *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 1287-1288

⁶ Philip S Alexander, “Essay with Commentary on Post-Biblical Jewish Literature”, *Oxford Bible Commentary*, p. 798

take anything away; someone in the field must not turn back to get a coat. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not be in winter. For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be.⁷

Mark's readers in the late first century already knew what this was all about. In 70AD, the temple had been destroyed and images of the emperor erected in its place. There is a touch of both eschatology and apocalyptic about the reading. Jesus talks about portents and wonderful things that go contrary to our experience of the natural world.

In the tradition of apocalyptic literature, Jesus seeks to change his hearers' view of the world. They lived under a dominant power and had everyday experience of what it meant. But he is also warning about listening to popular apocalyptic prophets. He encourages his readers not to be concerned about the end of the world, even though the world as they knew it was radically changing. His message was both similar to and different from the usual apocalyptic. He understood how the times would unsettle his followers but, instead of suggesting a coded outcome he told them to be alert. By this, he meant that they should live their lives as though the kingdom was already here. That way, they would not be caught by surprise. They were not to be drawn into the dominant discourse but were to live according to the coming kingdom.

So also for us. As we anticipate Christmas and the arrival of the Christ child, we must be watchful and not accept the destructive discourse that surrounds us. Advent invites us to think differently; to be alert.

A poem by Talitha Fraser⁸

Did you see the news today?
Law failed love.
Let love be law.

Did you see the news today?
Hospitality failed love.
Let love be hospitality.

Did you see the news today?
Justice failed love.
Let love be justice.

Did you see?⁹

⁷ Mark 13:14-19

⁸ <https://radicaldiscipleship.net/tag/talitha-fraser/>

⁹ Talitha Fraser, "Let love be law", *Eureka Street*, Vol 27 No 23, https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=54359&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Eureka%20Street%20Daily%20-%20Tuesday%2028%20November%202017&utm_content=Eureka%20Street%20Daily%20-%20Tuesday%2028%20November%202017+CID_6ea08e812406b70b82d029186533f44e&utm_source=Jescom%20Newsletters&utm_term=READ%20MORE