



Advent Sunday
27 November 2022

'But about that day and hour no one knows...' Matthew 24:36

Dear friends,

The words that greet us in the gospel on Advent Sunday are a reminder that even in the midst of celebrating the first Advent we are preparing for the second. Yet, as Stanley Hauerwas writes, we should avoid the temptation to engage in any 'theological weather forecasting' because no one knows the day or hour. In Matthew, this reality is paralleled with the need for disciples to endure, to stand firm even in the midst of persecution. To put it slightly differently in the words of St Paul, 'Endurance produces character, and character produces hope,' (Romans 5:4).

This is a timely reminder in a culture, including sometimes that of the Church, which values instant success above qualities such as persistence, faithfulness and hope. I wonder though whether we might also see Advent as a sign of divine patience, God waiting for the right time just as we too are called to wait patiently reading the signs around us and responding in witness. A colleague told me last week how he had been at a Fresh Expressions conference some years ago addressed by Rowan Williams. The former Archbishop had simply asked, 'What if this is still the era of the Early Church?'. In other words, what if we are just at the beginning of what God is unfolding in creating the new heaven and the new earth? But that question simply underlies the point: we do not know what time we live in whether we are the beginning, the middle or the end. Our task is simply to be faithful witnesses to all that God has done for us in Christ and continues to unfold through the Spirit.

Strangely I find that reassuring. It is not all down to me. The kingdom does not turn on the success of my or your witness yet somehow not only does God make space for it but God chooses to work through us. Our Advent hope then is one which requires both patience and hope and perhaps also a little humility. A quotation from Martin Luther King helpfully represents this for me. He once said,

'The plant of freedom has grown only a bud and not yet a flower.'

I find that a wonderfully evocative way of imagining the kingdom (or kin-dom as some prefer) of God and my part and place in it as I live towards the new heaven and the new earth. Let me close with some words of Advent encouragement from Carla Grolsch-Miller:

*For we know
every bud does not flower
Only those nourished by hope
and nurtured with courage
dare to bloom,
their beauty
first imagined
in the heart
of God
The Tender Shoot*

As we travel through Advent towards Christmas, I hope and pray that you will dare to bloom.

Yours in Christ,

Richard

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