



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Sunday, December 9, 2018**  
*The Second Sunday of Advent*

*Choral Evensong*  
*at 4 o'clock*

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A Sermon by  
Bishop Andrew St. John  
*on*  
Isaiah 5:1-7 and 2 Peter 3:11-18  
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### **Come Lord Jesus, Come**

The four traditional themes of the Advent season are Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell: all rather serious and sobering topics. But you will probably not hear much about them these days from many pulpits because they are somewhat out of fashion. The reality is that theology like so much else goes through periods of fashion. Just at present the church (at least in mainline churches) sits rather lightly on subjects such as the wrath of God, or the coming Day of Judgment, or Sin and Evil and Death, let alone Heaven and Hell. You might say a certain degree of political correctness has taken over and we avoid those unsettling and challenging topics as a result. Fleming Rutledge in her recent book of Advent sermons says that in the average Episcopal Church these days the four topics for Advent rather than death, judgment, heaven and hell are more likely to have become peace, love, joy, and hope. Not that the latter are bad themes but they are simply not the themes of Advent.

But, this evenings' readings are concerned with judgment of the house of Israel (Isaiah) and the coming Day of the Lord, when the heavens and earth will be dissolved (Second Peter). They have an uncompromising quality about them. In the Second Peter reading the verse just before the passage we heard tonight reads: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed." What are we to make of them and of the more apocalyptic passages in the Old and New Testaments? All this talk of the end of the world and the coming judgment makes us uncomfortable. Indeed, when I was training for the priesthood in the "demythologizing" Sixties those passages tended to be put aside in the "too hard basket" along with miracles, angels and demons as bordering on the fantastic, reflecting an outdated view of world, and rather offensive to our scientific, rational, and enlightenment sensibilities.

The apocalyptic literature in the Bible seems to come from a different universe than our own. Because mainline Christianity for many years rather ignored the Book of Revelation and the apocalyptic passages in the gospels and epistles, it allowed the Biblical fundamentalists of various shades to take possession of them and to have a field day in interpreting them, unchallenged by mainline Christianity.

So what do we make of these difficult subjects which inform our readings and hymns through Advent. How do we hear them and interpret them? Many years ago I was introduced to what is called the African Bible Study method. It was popularized by the Lambeth Conference back in the Eighties. The method is simple: a first reading of the passage to the group followed by each person identifying a word or phrase that stood out for them; then a second slow reading of the passage followed by each person identifying how the passage touches their lives today; and then another reading of the passage and further sharing. The approach is not so much what does the passage mean from an intellectual or objective point of view but how does this passage impact on me and my life today.

Take for instance the following contexts for reading tonights' or other Advent lections. Let's say we are reading this passage in a Bible study in a shelter for people made homeless by the recent terrible wild fires in Paradise, CA. I wonder how they would feel about the images of the dissolution of the heavens and the earth associated with the Last Day; or about issues related to the Day of Judgment. Coming from a wild fire prone part of the world similar to California I could identify with the people in Paradise to some degree. In February 1983 after a long period of drought a huge dust storm engulfed metropolitan Melbourne; the sky literally turned red and the sun was darkened while the storm passed; people talked about it being like the end of the world. That storm was followed by devastating bushfires; I still remember the hot ashes from the distant fire falling from the sky. The Day of Judgment did not seem far off.

Or perhaps our Bible study is taking place in Tijuana, Mexico, among a group of Honduran refugees who have fled the murderous environment of their homeland for fear of their lives seeking a more secure and peaceful future in this country only to be met by barriers, barbed wire, tear gas and endless bureaucracy. I wonder how they would reflect on the Advent readings. After all apocalyptic literature was addressed to those early Christians who were oppressed and persecuted giving them a sense that God was with them and would rescue them from the darkness of this world, from sin, evil and death; from oppression and persecution.

Or perhaps our Bible study is taking place in the Anglican Diocese of Goma in the eastern provinces of the Congo which have been torn apart by an almost constant state of warfare between opposing militias on and off for the past twenty years or more. I wonder how those faithful people hear the Advent readings. Like their brothers and sisters in Yemen or Syria, or Iraq, Afghanistan, or Pakistan they no doubt cry with loud voices the words of the Advent Prose which we will hear in both choral and instrumental form in a few moments, "Rorate caeli", from the Isaiah 64:1, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down so that the mountains would quake at your presence" (NRSV); or they may simply cry the ancient prayer preserved in its original Aramaic form and coming at the very end of the Bible, "Maranatha", "Come Lord Jesus, Come". Come in your power and judgment and rescue us from our agony; Come in your compassion and love and free us from the hopelessness we face; come in your power and might and save us from the enemies who surround us; Come and save us from the indifference of the world around us to our plight; from the impotence of nations to act on our behalf; from the apathy, selfishness and greed which enable humankind to ignore us.

The people to whom Peter's epistle was directed knew all about oppression and persecution. They were buffeted by both Roman and Jewish authorities. The Romans had outlawed them and the Jewish authorities saw them as heretics. This was the age of confessors and martyrs with Christians suffering and dying for their faith. To them Peter says: "Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home." In other words, God has more in store for you than you can imagine. So wait patiently and endure and pray, Come Lord, come.

Our situation may not be as extreme as those early Christians or of our contemporary brothers and sisters in some of the situations and places I have mentioned. But the message is the same. Whatever our particular situation; whatever health issues or relationship difficulties which we face; whatever struggles or losses we endure; never forget that in the End God. In the End God: God who is the Alpha and Omega; the beginning and the end. Our God, the God who created us, has promised his coming in time and at the end of time. We live in between those comings with the knowledge of Bethlehem on the one hand, and the prospect of God's reign on the other, and if you like with the Cross of Christ standing at the very crossroads of time. In the meantime, we live in the Spirit, celebrating our community of faith, hope and love, with our eyes fixed on Jesus, our Savior, and our Judge, and Lord of all. Amen.