

Anglican Diocese of Ballarat
Ministry Development Committee

ADVENT STUDIES

2022



Advent and the
Four Last Things

Introduction

Many Christians find the concept of Advent rather vague. Given that, around September (or even earlier), the shops start vigorously advertising deals for Christmas, a four-week church season leading up to the big day seems irrelevant.

The church has for some fifteen centuries observed Advent as the beginning of the liturgical year. It was developed as a period of fasting, similar to, but shorter and less rigorous than, Lent. (Ironically, the only association with Advent for most people outside the church today is the “Advent calendar”, the doors of which open on a special treat, such as a chocolate, for each day!)

The aim of this season of self-denial and meditation has always been to enable believers to prepare themselves both for the coming of the Lord in Bethlehem and also for his second coming at the end of time. This is clearly expressed in the prayer for the first week in Advent in the *Australian Prayer Book*:

Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness and put on the armour of light now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son came among us in great humility, that on the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to life immortal ...

As a focus for Advent meditations, Christians have traditionally been encouraged to spend time reflecting on the “four last things”: death, judgement, heaven, and hell. Taken in that order, each is the theme for one week in Advent. Many church people, however, prefer not to think about them. Amid the alluring pre-Christmas commercialism, promoting self-indulgence and celebrating family and friends, giving thought to the “last things” can appear a bit morbid. Furthermore, in

the minds of some, they are associated with judgemental fundamentalism or other-worldly mysticism.

Despite such reservations, there can be great value in focussing our minds on these four pillars of the faith. Since Advent is the beginning of the church year, it reminds us collectively of the passing of time, much as our birthdays do for each of us individually. On our birthdays we often think of the future: “In what ways can I make this coming year better than the one just gone?”; “Where do I want to be in five years’ time?”.

Similarly, in Advent we Christians are reminded that our future is to be taken seriously. We are exhorted to think forward to the end of time itself, when, as the author of Revelation proclaims, “The kingdom of the world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ: and he shall reign for ever and ever” (ch.11 v.5). In the light of eternity, let us ponder on our own lives. At some unknown date will come our own death, but we need no longer be afraid, as Our Lord, who overcame death, is our advocate.

We have confidence because that is what the coming of Christ meant and will mean. He came to us as a human infant in Bethlehem; he comes to us in the bread and wine of Eucharist; and he will come again to judge the living and the dead at the end of time. In Advent week 1 we reflect on Death; in week 2 on Judgement. And in case their significance escaped us, in the last two weeks we are reminded of Heaven and Hell. Do we want to spend eternity in the presence of our loving God, or forever removed from God?

These are the great questions that we can, and must, decide in our time here on earth. Advent reminds us of our great journey through time; it encourages us to spend that journey preparing our way by casting off the works of darkness and devoting ourselves to the Lord of Light.

Mark Garner

ADVENT WEEK 1

A reflection on Death

Kate Schnerring



“Remember that all worlds draw to an end and that noble death is a treasure which no one is too poor to buy.”

*C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia**

Reading is very popular in our house, and audiobooks are especially great at preserving my sanity during long car trips with three children ... Some of the most popular have been the Chronicles of Narnia.

A surprising aspect of C.S. Lewis' children's stories to me is the fact that he chose to deal with death openly and frankly. Children's books that talk about death?!

In the stories of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis illustrates the basic truth of Christianity: in a fallen world, there is no "real" life without death. Aslan, the great Lion, rescues all of Narnia and defeats the White Witch, not in battle, but through his sacrificial death at the Stone Table. Aslan willingly gives up his life for one who has betrayed the community and, in so doing, frees Narnia from the power of death.

A theme that is repeated often, not only in the Bible, but by scholars over hundreds of years:

"The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" *1 Timothy 1:15*

"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions - it is by grace you have been saved." *Ephesians 2:4-5*

"Live so as not to fear death. For those who live well in the world, death is not frightening but sweet and precious." *St. Rose of Viterbo*

"I don't so much pray that my death will be without pain, but that it will be without doubt." *John Piper*

Questions

Reflect on the quotes above: what speaks most to you? What does it say about your Advent journey, or the message of Christmas? Why would we think about death at this time of the year?

Along with the baby being born at Christmas time, there also comes our second chance! A chance at living our best life for Him: are you fulfilling his purposes for all eternity?

Denying death does nothing other than distract us from an unavoidable reality. As Christians, we have no reason to fear death. What do you feel when you think about death?

Jesus Christ paid a debt that none of us could pay with Crucifixion. By His resurrection He showed us the way to Eternal Life. We have all been invited to Salvation, we need only accept. Have you?

Prayer

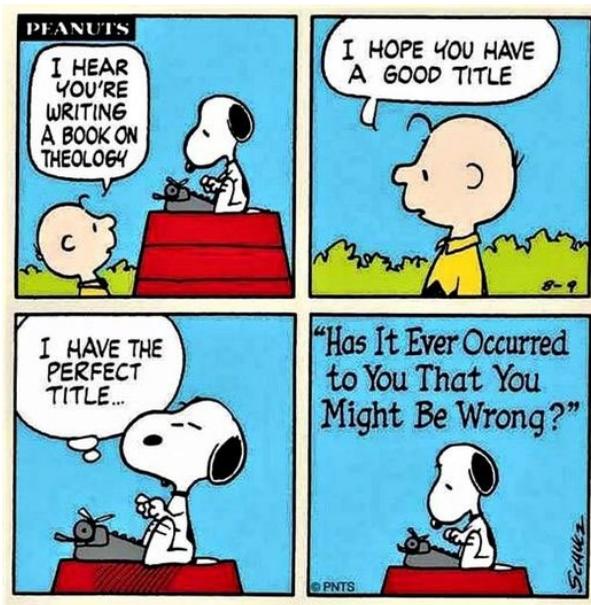
Heavenly Father,

As we contemplate the Birth of Christ this Advent season, help keep in our sights the journey from the Manger to the Tomb. We pray that Advent will be more than chaos and some celebrations of Jesus' birth – but also a chance to look *forward!* - to Jesus fulfilling the prophesy that was written in the Old Testament: death on a cross, for you and me.

ADVENT WEEK 2

A reflection on Judgement

+Garry Weatherill



What judgements are being made in this Peanuts cartoon?

What judgement is Charlie Brown making about Snoopy's new book?

What judgement is Snoopy making about the nature of theological thinking?

What judgement is Snoopy making about the readers of his book?

What judgement do you make about Snoopy's project?

We all make judgemental comments all the time as we seek to make sense of our world and our place in the world. It is part of being human.

The Scriptures have some tough things to say about this very human activity.

Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? ... For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God ... So then each of us will be accountable to God. *Romans 14:10 ff*

Do not judge, and you will not be judged: do not condemn and you will not be condemned. *Luke 6:37*

And perhaps the most salutary warning about our tendency to judge others:

Do not judge so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make will you be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. *Matt 7:1*

Questions

The Bible says that real judgement belongs to God. We will each be accountable to God for the way we have lived our lives. Can you think of a Biblical example of this understanding of Judgement?

What sort of Judgement will we receive from God when our lives are ended?

Some of the language of the last book of the Bible, the Revelation to John, uses the language of a ruler's court to describe the judgement of God. Sometimes the language and imagery are very strange. Look up Revelation 19:11-16. What do you make of this passage?

Week by week in the Nicene Creed that we use at Holy Communion we say:

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

Who is being talked about in this part of the Creed?

Finally, Christians have different ideas about what judgement means. For some it is terrifying. For others, it is something to rejoice in, and to be embraced.

What do you think about God's judgement?

Prayer

Heavenly Father,
I pray for an understanding and discerning heart. Help me not to judge others but to respond to the challenges and problems that they are facing. May I be a channel of blessing; may I never develop a judgemental spirit that can so often jump to the wrong conclusions. May I always reflect your forgiving spirit; may those I interact with encounter Christ's love in me.

ADVENT WEEK 3

A reflection on Heaven

Mark Garner



The Bible refers to heaven a lot, but it is very difficult to form a clear idea of what is meant by it. Has it a physical setting, and, if so, where? It is often portrayed as the home of God, situated high above the earth:

The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind
to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God.

Psalms 14:2

Thus says the LORD:

Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. *Isaiah 66:1*

In this home, God is accompanied by angels:

... you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.' *John 1:51*

In some places, the Scripture suggests that, through the redeeming work of Christ, his followers will leave the earth and join him and his Father in heaven. Jesus said to the thief on the cross:

I tell you this, today you will be with me in Paradise. *Luke 23:43*

Paul wrote to Timothy:

The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. *2 Tim 4:18*

Heaven is described in some places as some sort of building:

In my Father's house there are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you, for I go to prepare a place for you.

John 14:2

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. *2 Corinthians 5:1*

[Those who died in faith] are seeking a homeland ... they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them. *Hebrews 11: 13-16*

In Revelation, it is implied that, at the end of time, heaven will be established on earth:

I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them."

Revelation 21: 2-3

What will heaven be like? (The stereotypical picture of all of us sitting around on clouds playing harps is dreadfully dull!) The Bible says very little about what will happen there, but assures us that the quality of life, in the eternal presence of God, will be perfect.

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. *2 Corinthians 4:17*

[Jesus said] ... those who are considered worthy of a place in the other world and in the resurrection from the dead ... cannot die any more, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. *Luke 20: 34-36*

As others have written:

It might reasonably be maintained that the true object of all human life is play. Earth is a task garden; heaven is a playground. *G.K. Chesterton*

The most thrilling thing about heaven is that Jesus Christ will be there. I will see Him face to face. Jesus Christ will meet us at the end of life's journey. *Billy Graham*

The fact that our heart yearns for something Earth can't supply is proof that Heaven must be our home. *CS Lewis*

We may speak about a place where there are no tears, no death, no fear, no night; but those are just the benefits of heaven. The beauty of heaven is seeing God. *Max Lucado*

Questions

What you think about heaven, what do you see in your mind's eye?

Does heaven exist already, although unseen by us, or will it be brought into being at the Last Judgement? Where do you think it is (or will be) situated? If it exists now, will those who die in the faith go to heaven immediately, or will they wait for Christ's Second Coming?

What, for you, would be the perfect way to spend eternity (resting, being creative, playing, interacting ...)?

How should we Christians seek to live our earthly lives so as to prepare ourselves for heaven?

Something very good is quite often described (and not only by Christians) as "heaven on earth". Is this just a figure of speech, or is it possible to experience something of heaven in this world?

Prayer

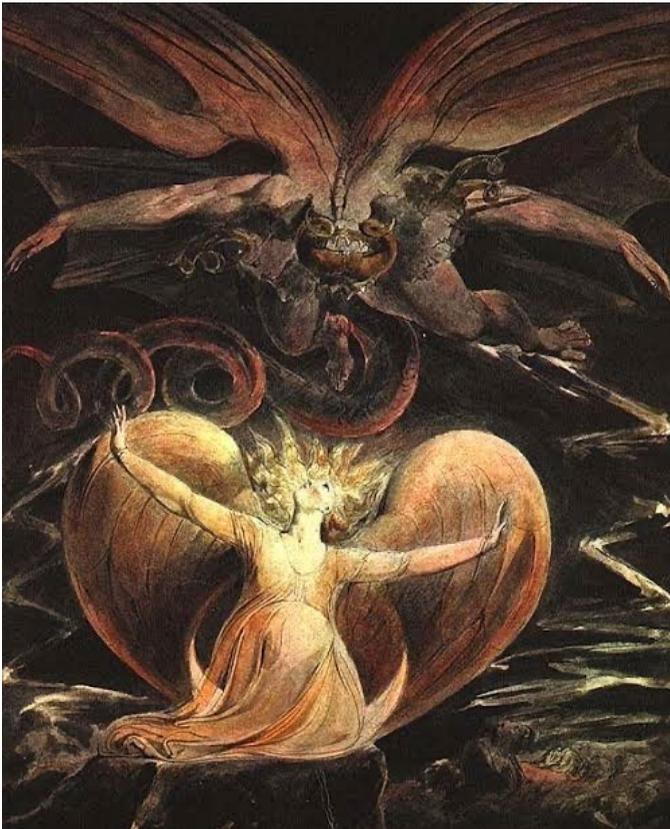
Almighty God,

With whom do live the spirits of them that depart hence in the Lord, and with whom the souls of the faithful, after they are delivered from the flesh, are in joy and felicity ... hasten thy kingdom, that we with all those that are departed in true faith of thy holy Name, may have our perfect consummation and bliss, both in body and soul, in thy eternal and everlasting glory ... (*Book of Common Prayer, Burial of the Dead*)

ADVENT WEEK 4

A reflection on Hell

Kay Job



I consider this image, painted by William Blake around 1805 (referencing Revelation 12:1-4), to be a good representation of the interplay between the messages of Hell and Advent. We like to think of Advent as Mary holding her divine yet human infant, all blue and gold with sweet little lambies around watching on. So perhaps the image of the malevolent threatening that scene is somewhat confronting.

What does Hell have to do with Advent? I suggest that the answer to that question depends on your understanding or definition of hell. Traditional ideas are of it being 'below', a place of suffering and misery, and to be avoided. Regardless how you view it, as Christians we must recognise the reality that hell exists. 2 Thes 1:9 speaks of being "...shut out from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his might." Jesus cries out in lament, at this absence of God in Matthew 27:46. At Advent, we celebrate the beginning of the story while still knowing how it ends; that Jesus comes and enters our estrangement from God. He stands in the alienation (Hell) with us. And invites us to relationship.

At Advent, the presence of Hell reminds us that we have a responsibility to be responsive to God's invitation to relationship, because the ultimate everlasting loss would be to say, "'No' to God's truth and love." (From *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, p. 292.) In our picture, the round belly of the woman declares pregnancy with a new covenant. Her arms are spread wide, in a gesture of immovable resistance. She shines like the sun – bold, white with heat. She is the embodiment of Advent: all promise and strength and declaration. The dragon hovers above menacingly, to intimidate and bring fear, exuding from darkness yet not fully defined; elusive. It is an image of Hell. Existing yet limited, threatening but hindered. Our relationship to Hell is determined by our relationship with God, through the miracle of Advent.

Questions

What is Hell and how does the message of Advent impact upon that understanding in my life?

Does, has, or should that change how I live in the day-to-day? How?

Prayer

Thank you, God, for your unfailing and great love.

Thank you that your deepest desire is to keep me from the never-ending misery of being separated from you.

May the truth of the gift of your son, Jesus, bring me to a deeper understanding of the choice

I have to respond and follow you.

And as I look at the star this Christmas,

remind me that heaven is the destination I choose. Amen.