

The Inbetweeners

I'm not sure if many of you are fans of the TV sitcom The Inbetweeners, if you haven't heard of it probably best you don't rush home and find it. Released around 2008 it ran for 3 seasons with 2 follow up films, and charted the awkward adjustments a group of four male friends are trying to make during adolescence. How they navigate the confusions and changes, how their bravado catches them out time and time again and their certainty masking their uncertainty trips them up is not for the fainthearted and easily offended to watch! Being in between childhood and adulthood is shown for the confusing and painful time it can be. Being in between anything can be unsettling, confusing and at times painful. So, welcome to the season of Advent! While the world goes full festive warmth, we get a bucket of cold water poured over us this morning. And in the shock that follows we are invited to see ourselves as inbetweeners, inhabiting this in between season and beyond.

Matthew is the perfect Advent gospel! Those of us who gathered to read it through this week discovered a gospel that has been designed to draw themes together, many of which are about how to live in the in between. If Matthew is written after 70AD then his community is facing the prospect of living in the in between space of the Temple being destroyed and Judaism and Christianity

working out how they relate to each other. They're also living in the in between space of waiting for Christ's return which suits us perfectly in this season of the four last things: death, judgement, heaven and hell, Christmas this is not. And so, for liturgy geeks, of which I think you may have realised I am one, this is a season of expectation not penitence, a season of waiting and watching, and Matthew in particular is pretty up front about that.

But before we get to Matthew these themes surface in the earlier Jewish and Christian literature. Isaiah's prophecy is actually found in Micah too, part of a general prophetic tradition, a promise of the consummation of all things in God's kingdom.¹ It is a reminder that the current world order we find ourselves in is not the world order God wants to usher in. It is a reminder that this world will be judged, it is not the source of true authority, and it is not the source of hope for the future. This world is the source of conflict, the sword, the spear, the making of war.² That is the world that is about to be judged. But regardless of where power seems to lie in the present, the day is coming when God's reign will be established for all humankind to see.³

¹ Bruce C Birch, *Feasting on the Word: Year A volume 1*, p.3

² *ibid* p.5

³ *ibid*, p.3

This hope, this desire, grows into the Jewish Apocalyptic tradition of which Matthew is very firmly part of. Images of light overcoming the darkness, of final battles where good conquers, of cosmic shifts and significance. Advent is the express hope of a coming new world that we wait for.

And Paul plays with these ideas in the letter to the Romans. You know the time, he says, it's time to wake up, it's time to live in the light. Salvation has drawn nearer and nearer but it hasn't fully arrived yet, we're still in the period of waiting expectantly. But for Paul, and certainly for Matthew later, that waiting is not an inactivity. We must wake up, we must cast off things that hinder and put on things that will bring light, we must live as if it were the day even though the darkness feels like it is encroaching on us constantly. Advent has ethical implications for us as we work for the coming kingdom. "Every step we take in this world is a step toward either darkness or light. Every harsh word, every mean act, every vengeful thought is a part of the works of darkness. Every act of forgiveness, every small act of charity, every temptation resisted is a piece of the armour of light."⁴

⁴ Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*, p.270

And all of this is bubbling away in Matthew. Our reading this morning is found in Matthew's Fifth Discourse, which pretty much deals with judgement and eschatological matters. It's very much based on Mark 13, and so it is interesting to note what Matthew has added to his Marcan source. Matthew wants his community to focus on the uncertainty of Christ's return and the appropriate stance of watchfulness.⁵ If Matthew's community is beginning to break away from their Jewish roots, if they are being taunted about their hope in the return of Christ which seems to be ever further away, then Matthew's crafting of his material here is a response to those taunts.

He brings the story of Noah in not to whip up fear, but to remind them and us, that the flood happened as people were going about their ordinary everyday lives. Advent grounds us in the ordinary existence of the here and now while we wait for the coming fulness of God's kingdom. It contains within itself the crucial balance of the now and the not-yet that our faith requires. It calls us to be an Advent people in a Christmas world. But it is different from the other liturgical seasons in that it looks beyond history altogether and

⁵ Daniel J Harrington, *Matthew*, p.346

awaits Jesus Christ's coming again in glory to judge the living and the dead, as the Creed has it.⁶ Matthew's reminder on judgement is a reminder that as Christians every day is in a sense a day of judgement. Every day confronts us with God's radical claim on us here and now. The Son of Man is coming then, now we must live as if he has already come. Each day is a day of judgement. Am I living the way of Christ? Am I trusting in him? Have I allowed myself to be distracted by selfishness or fear?

“Advent tells us about our own lives as Christians, here and now. Advent is where we live, work, play, laugh, struggle, and die. Advent is the Time Between – between the first coming of Christ and the second coming, between darkness and dawn, between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.”⁷ And that is what Matthew is trying to get us to see, we are in betweeners, living between two worlds and that requires us to watch and wait. Not hopelessly, not despairingly but joyfully awaiting the promise. In Advent we reclaim our sense of life and mission, why we exist at all as a Church. Advent's focus on the reign of God takes us beyond ourselves and our seriousness, takes us beyond this world order and

⁶ Rutledge, p.6-7

⁷ *ibid*, p.268

its chaos, takes us beyond the superficial to hone once again the counter-cultural edge of the Gospel right at the beginning of the liturgical year. Of all the seasons of the Church year, Advent most closely mirrors the tensions of our own lived experiences, it asks the most important ethical questions of us, presents the most accurate picture of the human condition, and above all, orients us to the future of the God who will come again.

That's the command of Matthew, the exhortation of Paul and the invitation of Isaiah, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord. Many of us may be quite far away from adolescence, and even our second adolescence, but what the TV show *The Inbetweeners* showed us is what it is like being a follower of Jesus Christ in this in between state. The confusions and changes, if God reigns then why ...? The bravado and certainty, the temptation to move beyond faith and have concrete certainties that are rarely from God, held so rigidly that that not even grace can find a way in. This Advent Matthew calls all that out, we do have certainty: that time belongs to God and that the kingdom of Jesus Christ, which is breaking into the world now will one day be fully realised. It is that certainty we hold as we navigate the ethical demands of Advent, how we live our lives out with the demands of Christ on us; as we build God's kingdom in our worship, in our giving, in our service to the world around us. Advent is a

Year A
Advent I
Isaiah 2:1-5
Romans 13:11-end
Matthew 24:36-44

call to each of us, people of Berwick come, let us walk in the light of the Lord
this Advent and beyond.