

GOSPEL SEEDS DECEMBER, 2006

Biblical reflections to encourage us in the work of evangelisation

BEHOLD OUR GOD, COMING IN GLORY!

Jesus Christ [is] the faithful witness, the First-born from the dead, the highest of earthly kings. He loves us and has washed away our sins with his blood, and made us a Kingdom of Priests to serve his God and Father; to him, then, be glory and power for ever and ever. Amen. Look, he is coming on the clouds; everyone will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the races of the earth will mourn over him. Indeed, this shall be so. Amen. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega' says the Lord God, who is, who was, and who is to come, the Almighty. (Revelation 1:5-8)

We pray 'Come, Lord Jesus, come (Revelation 22:20)!' This prayer which should be part of our overall prayer and outlook as Christians has particular poignancy in Advent. But how do we expect him to come? Is this prayer just about the end of the world? Does the manner and prospect of his coming have an impact on us now? Does the future break into the present, influencing it even now? Let us explore a bit.

Who is our God who comes on the clouds?

'Look, he is coming on the clouds!' This phrase is also found in the synoptic Gospels in the versions of the Apocalypse of Jesus given there. It inclines us to think of someone who has the recognisable dimensions and features of an ordinary man if somehow more radiantly. Perhaps he is like the transfigured Jesus whose clothes became sparkling white and the aspect of whose face changed (Luke 9:29). But the transfigured Christ was restricted, to a particular place and time and such an association perhaps inclines us to think Christ will return to (only) a particular place: New York, London or Jerusalem perhaps? But how then can he be seen by all people if he comes in this way? And in such a way that every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord (Phil 2:9-11)? Surely there must be more to how he returns 'on the clouds' than this?

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus gives us a clue when he says that he returns 'coming in a cloud with power and great glory' (Luke 21:27). Cloud is a sign of God's presence. The manner in which Christ appears to John in his vision at the beginning of the Book of Revelation tells us still more. John adds: 'I saw seven golden lamp-stands, and in the middle of them, one like a Son of man, dressed in a long robe, tied at the waist with a belt of gold. His head

and his hair were white with the whiteness of wool, like snow; his eyes like a burning flame; his feet like burnished bronze when it has been refined in a furnace; and his voice like the sound of the ocean. In his right hand, he was holding seven stars, out of his mouth came a sharp sword, double-edged, and his face was like the sun shining with all its force' (Revelation 1:13-16). This certainly evokes Luke's power and great glory.

Peter had been dazed and lost some mental coherence at the sight of the Transfigured Christ (Luke 9:33), but now John, who also witnessed that event, falls down as though dead, such is the awesome sight he has beheld. Just to take one feature, we cannot bear to look at the midday Sun for more than a second or two, and even that is not advised, yet here the face of Jesus shines like the Sun with its full force. No wonder John collapses! It is the voice of Christ that raises him up again. 'Do not be afraid! It is I, the First and the Last; I am the Living One. I was dead and look I am alive for ever and ever, and I hold the keys of death and of Hades' (v18-19).

Divinity and Glory Hidden and Revealed in Matter

Each of these features has symbolic significance: Christ is Priest (white garment), is eternal (white hair), is royal king (gold band), is all seeing (eyes of burning flame) etc. It is Christ in full glory, this word 'glory' meaning the manifest presence of God. His glorified body is so full of extraordinary features that it seems no longer human! (In contrast, previously his features were so tortured that he appeared no longer human - Isaiah 52:14). Yet this is still 'one like the Son of Man'. This is a reference to a heavenly figure first found in the book of Daniel (7:13-14), who is at once human and also caught up in the world of God, perhaps even Divine.

The Glorified Christ is the mystery of Incarnation still holding, but taken to the very opposite pole to that of the Carpenter from Nazareth. Then, Divinity was squashed and hidden within the proportions of a human life - the earthly humanity of Jesus, yet glimpses of Divinity still shone through.

Now this humanity is expanded and stretched, beyond the laws of science, to the proportions of Divinity. All Incarnational states are extraordinary, even miraculous! All are epiphanies showings - of God. The presence of God, once confined to the dimensions of a tiny baby, now as the Risen Lord fills the whole universe (Eph 4:11) and at the end will so fully manifest his Divinity that all knees will be able to do nothing else than bow and confess Jesus as Lord.

Jesus was almost entirely subject to the laws of science while first on earth, excepting his miracles. From the Resurrection onwards, matter has been stretched beyond the breaking point of laws of science by Christ's presence. We find expression of this in the Eucharist in which Christ is truly and fully

present under the material appearance of bread and wine. This is a foretaste and indication of what is to come, the Eucharist being celebrated until he comes in glory. Though God's glory has always been glimpsed in creation and history, matter and its current ways of working will simply not be adequate to express the full glory of God, or as much of it as God will then reveal. Yet there will still be matter. At Christ's appearing in full manifest glory (his 'second coming' or 'parousia' meaning 'presence'), the present configuration of material reality will melt away and a new heavens and earth will appear (2 Peter 3:10-13). At the Parousia, God will be present in a full way, everywhere. It is God being God in the richness, weight, wonder, truth, majesty and beauty of who he is. The veil around God will be removed. This full Glory of God judges and transforms all reality. What was always authentically of Christ and in Christ even if largely hidden till then will now be seen for what it is (cf Colossians 3:1-4, 1Corinthians 3:10-15).

Receiving the Transforming Power of Christ in Glory even Now!

Christ in glory affects our perspectives and lives in all sorts of ways. We can already sense it in prayer, by the gift of the Spirit, and it gives us hope. 'It is to heaven we look expectantly for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ to save us; he will form this humbled body of ours anew, moulding it into the image of his glorious body, so effective is his power to make all things obey him' (Phil 3:20-21). With eyes of faith, how do we see Jesus now? In glorious power? Who is the Jesus we pray to? The glorified Jesus that John sees in vision? Surely reflecting on such a vision increases our faith and expectancy! He is truly a mighty advocate (Romans 8:34). Our view of ourselves changes too. We are earthen vessels but we hold an eternal treasure (2 Corinthians 4:7). As the Transfiguration prepared the apostles for the passion, so this vision of glory can sustain us for all of life. The Glorified Christ even now actually transforms us (2 Corinthians 4:6). He is sacramentally present and active. Our perspective on mission also changes. Being heralds of such a coming King makes us bold as we proclaim our coming glorious King! For all these reasons, we pray, 'Come Lord Jesus, come in your transforming glory!'

© Andrew Brookes

[COSMAC, Gospel Seeds: 06/12] Email: andrewbrookes@straitmail.co.uk
(This may be reproduced for free distribution if authorship / copyright are noted.)