

Advent Sermon

**HRH The Prince Philip
St George's Chapel, Windsor
27th November 1988**

Theme: The Coming of Christ – The Creator made Created

ADVENT marks the beginning of the Christian year and it falls – perhaps appropriately – in the most sterile of the seasons. The harvest has been gathered in, dead leaves are falling from the trees and everything in nature seems to be bracing itself for the harshness of winter.

It is at this lowest point of our year that the Christian church sends out the signal of renewal. Christians are asked to prepare for the coming again of our Saviour. As we go into the darkest days of winter. We are encouraged to think of the prospect of nature's re-growth and of our own spiritual rebirth.

Britain happens to be an island in the temperature zone where the four seasons are clearly marked, even though our summers may not be all that we might hope for. The seasons may be different in other parts of the world, but nature follows the same cycle of birth, growth, maturity, death and rebirth.

Scientists tell us that our universe was born in a massive explosion and that it is still expanding. They also tell us that our planet, one of thousands of millions of specks of matter in the vastness of space, will eventually have a death when the sun's energy slowly peters out and it become a 'red giant'.

As Christians we believe that the explosion that gave birth to the universe was caused by God and that it was He who smiled on our particular planet Earth and gave it the air and the water and the soil and the climatic conditions that make life possible.

The human species is part of His earthly Creation and our lives follow exactly the same pattern that He ordained for all living things, but with one very significant difference. We can communicate by speech and writing, we can reflect, we can inquire and we can worship. Unlike any other form of life – as far as we know – we are capable of being aware of our situation and we ought to know that we are living on a planet of finite size within the infinity of space. Those who share this knowledge also share a special responsibility for the health and well-being of our planetary systems and all life that they support.

Scientists have discovered the physical laws of nature; they have revealed the inter-relationship of the natural systems and the inter-dependence of all living species. Most people must know that we depend for our food on the planting, growth and harvesting of crops, and on the mating, birth and growth of domestic and wild animal species.

What believers in all religions ought to know, and what we seem to have forgotten, is that God has put a limit to the endurance of all natural systems. The evidence is mounting that the human species is stretching those limits to the point of breakdown. It is as if we were pushing the life and systems of our rich and varied globe into a winter of death without hope of re-birth and regeneration and without the expectation of spring.

Advent reminds Christians that there is the hope of spiritual re-birth at Christmas; it should also remind us that humanity is part of the natural order and it is our responsibility to give all life on earth that same chance of renewal and re-birth. It ought to remind us that we have no right to exploit it selfishly and ruthlessly. We are partners with all life on earth and joint beneficiaries of God's gifts of the life-giving air, water and soil. It should remind us that God did not make us masters of His Creation, He expects us to be its guardians.

We should reflect that, unlike many other species, we ought to know that we have the choice of doing good or untold damage to our planet. We know that our successors will inherit the earth, yet the physical systems of the planet and all the life that they support are being seriously damaged as a direct consequence of the continuing growth of the human population and human activities, and the increasing human exploitation of natural resources.

If people with knowledge and in positions of influence, power or authority are not very careful, their decisions could, in this generation, achieve the ultimate idiocy by starting a process of decline that could make life very difficult for future generations and ultimately condemn our own species itself to extinction.

We are told that God so loved the world what He had created on earth that He sent His Son to help us understand our responsibilities to each other and to Him. His Son was crucified and, as St John writes, "He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not". Yet, in spite of that rejection, God gave us a second chance by causing His Resurrection and Ascension.

It seems to be very unwise to assume that He will be quite so forgiving if the most powerful of all living species was to cause the death of His Creation here on earth. He may be a loving God, but He has made some very strict rules about the way things work in this world. Enough species of plants and animals have already disappeared from the face of the earth for us to realise that He has decreed that extinction is forever.

The significance of Advent, in terms of the life story of our globe, is that when the system is at its lowest ebb, there is the promise of a new start. Christians need to use the annual celebration of the birth of our Lord as an inspiration to become better and more considerate guardians of His Creation, so that its beauties and wonder, whether they are practically useful to us or not, can continue to praise Him and to give Him the pleasure and satisfaction that He felt at the end of the fifth day when He "...saw all that He had made, and it was very good."