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978-0-521-09778-9 - The Coming of Christ: Four Broadcast Addresses for the Season of Advent

C. H. Dodd

Excerpt

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I

FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

THE PROMISE OF HIS COMING

THE period immediately before Christmas is known in the Church calendar as the season of Advent, the word 'advent' meaning a coming, or an arrival. The theme of Advent is the coming of Christ into the world. We are accustomed to use that expression in two different senses, which seem to run into one another. On the one hand, we think of the coming of Christ as a babe at Christmas, and on the other hand we think of a more mysterious coming, which is often called His 'second advent'. All through these weeks we are in a mood of expectancy. On one side of it our expectation will be fulfilled when Christmas comes, and we are able to sing: 'Christians, awake! Salute the happy morn, Whereon the Saviour of mankind was born.' But what about that other expectation?

'He shall come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead.' In those words the whole Christian world confesses its faith. They are words that stir the imagination, and speak to

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something lying very deep in us. But what precisely do we mean by them? How does it fit into our general outlook on life and the world in the twentieth century?

We must begin by looking at the New Testament, to see if we can form any clear idea of what was in the minds of the early Christian teachers who handed down this belief to later ages. 'The promise of His coming' was for them all a matter of profound conviction; but they speak variously, and often obscurely, about the manner of the coming, its time and place, and what is to follow. Perhaps they differ less than might appear. They are in any case not setting out to give precise specifications in advance of what is going to happen, like history written in reverse. They are hinting, through images and symbols, at truths which cannot be baldly stated in plain prose. Symbolism is fluid, and images change as one aspect or another of the truth comes into view. So we need not be in the least surprised if one writer speaks of Christ coming down on a cloud, and another speaks of Him riding a white horse at the head of the armies of heaven. They are not speaking of different things.

The imagery was created by poets, some of whose works are in the Old Testament, especially

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in the Psalms, the Book of Job, and parts of the prophetic books. These biblical writers have one over-riding theme: the majesty of God. Everything that is awe-inspiring in nature speaks to them of His majesty: great mountains, earthquakes, eclipses of the sun and moon, shooting meteors, storms at sea, and the uncanny calm that sometimes succeeds a storm: 'He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves are still.' The prophets often spoke of a great Day to come, when God would make His power and righteousness known to all nations; and they turned the same time-honoured symbolism to account. It meets us again in the New Testament:

'There shall be signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity for the roaring of the sea and the billows.' 'The sun shall be darkened and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall out of the sky, and the powers that are in the heavens shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.'

It would be intolerable to take such language with a prosaic literalness. It is addressed to the imagination, and read with imagination it gives a key to what the coming of Christ meant to the first Christians. It was the final disclosure of the

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power and righteousness of God, and the end of history as we know it. It was the 'one divine event to which the whole creation moves'.

But not a 'far-off divine event'; not far off at all. Most of them were persuaded it would happen very soon. It might happen any day. They had to be on the alert; everything was uncertain, except the one certainty: the Lord would come.

Since this whole present scheme of things (they thought) could not be relied on to hold together for any appreciable time, they sat loose to it. And that detachment bred a sense of freedom and independence. Because they had no stake in the existing order, they were able to set about creating a new kind of society, on a new ethical basis. Paradoxically, because they thought there was not going to be any more history, they made history.

They believed that the Last Judgment was so near that they were living practically in its presence; and that was a mighty stimulant to the conscience. At the same time it made them willing to let the Almighty manage His own business; and in particular it saved them from the temptation to forestall His judgment on their fellow-men. 'Pass no judgment before the time', wrote Paul, 'until the Lord comes.' It was not their business to put other people right. They had

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enough to do, and God had the situation well in hand.

But the most striking thing about the early Christians was their astonishing confidence in the face of overwhelming opposition. The Church was a minority movement, with every kind of power in the world against it. But they were convinced that all this power was already crumbling away. They knew it, and soon (they thought) everyone would know it. So they refused to be intimidated.

In giving this very summary sketch of the outlook of an early Christian I have left out a most important fact. These people did not simply expect a great 'divine event'; they expected the coming of Jesus Christ, whom they knew. It was not just a Last Judgment they expected. It was the judgment of Christ; and they knew what standards He judged by, and how His judgment passed into a forgiveness that set a man up again. The victory they counted on was the victory of Christ—the same who had preached the Sermon on the Mount, befriended publicans and sinners, and sacrificed His life for love of the human race. The Christian hope might be expressed in fantastic imagery, but it was based on no fantasy, but upon known facts about a known person, whose known character and achievement gave a clear stamp to the picture

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of what was to come. The really distinctive thing about the early Christian outlook was not so much the expectation of something that was going to happen, as the understanding of what had happened: Christ's life, teaching and death, in history.

This became very important when the expectation of His early return proved an illusion. The Church was mistaken about the date of the great event. At first they had looked for it almost any day. During the first century events occurred from time to time which raised hopes that it was at hand; but they were always disappointed, as similar hopes have been disappointed many times since. When a century had passed after the death of Jesus, one of the later writers of the New Testament observed that 'one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day'; as much as to say, ordinary time-measurements do not apply; it may be thousands of years before the Lord comes; even so, He comes soon. But perhaps there is more to it than that. If the early Christians were mistaken about the date, perhaps they were mistaken in trying to fix a date at all. Perhaps the coming of Christ is dateless, because it lies outside our system of time-reckoning altogether.

It might have been expected that when the

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Church proved to have been mistaken on such an important point, its faith would have been shaken to its foundations, and its mission to the world discredited. But not at all. The surprising thing is that the period in which the first expectation of Christ's early return faded away was a great period in the history of the Church; a period in which it developed and consolidated its beliefs, endured persecution heroically, and grew rapidly in numbers. Evidently the mistake about the date did not touch the substance of the Christian hope. How was this? I believe the answer is that, through the disappointment of the hopes they had formed, they woke to something they had always known, but until then had not fully appreciated: the thing *had happened*; Christ had come. All these years they had been living on that fact, while they supposed their faith hung upon the prospect of His second coming. Now it came home to them: God's victory was won; Christ had won it; and they already shared in it. So they made the necessary readjustments in their thought without for a moment losing grip.

That did not mean that they gave up the hope of another coming of Christ. They were realists. They knew that God's enemies were still strongly entrenched in their positions, and there were

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many battles still to fight. God's victory was won; it was yet to win. Both things were true. So the Christian life became a tension between realisation and expectation. After all, even in our daily prayer we say: 'Thy kingdom come. . . For thine is the kingdom, for ever.' The kingdom is still to come, and yet it is present, always; and that is why we have confidence in praying for its coming. It may be a paradox, but this tension has been a great strength to the Christian religion. So it seems we must say that for the early Church the coming of Christ was both present and future, both at once. You could not say that of any ordinary event in history. But, as I suggested before, the coming of Christ is an event that lies outside our system of time-reckoning. It has no date; and so through the whole season of Advent we can speak of the coming of Christ, meaning both His birth into the world a long time ago, and the unimaginable fullness of His coming; and speak of both as if they lay just round the corner.

The tension between realisation and expectation found moving expression in the worship of the early Church. The first Christians were accustomed to meet regularly and often to take a meal together in memory of Jesus. At such a meal

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He had taken leave of them on the evening before His death. They made the memory vivid by repeating what He had said and done on that never-to-be-forgotten occasion. Thus the facts of His life and death became more than a memory: a present experience. Then they prayed together. One of the prayers they used on such occasions has come down to us from the very earliest days in the Aramaic speech which was native to Jesus and His first disciples. It consists of two words: 'Lord, come!' (*Marana tha*). If we use our imagination to enter with sympathy into the scene, those words, in their extreme simplicity, bear witness to the spirit of tense expectancy in which they came together. But they did not stop at that. They knew that a Presence was there, unseen and unheard, but real: the Lord had come to them. 'He was known to them in the breaking of bread.' Expectation passed into realisation. And realisation in turn kindled fresh expectancy. For the more deeply they appreciated what they had already received, the more clearly they knew that there is on earth nothing complete—there is always more to hope for. Thus both the urgency and the immediacy of the early hope, which might have seemed lost when the date of the great event was postponed indefinitely, were restored, and

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the permanent rhythm of the Christian faith was established.

If you are accustomed to go to church, you will of course recognise that I have been describing an early form of the service which is still the centre of Christian worship—whether we call it the Lord's Supper or the Mass, the Eucharist or Holy Communion. I have drawn your attention to it because I believe it is here that we must look for a key to the paradox of a coming of Christ which is past, present and future all in one. It is perhaps not possible to put the truth into plain logical speech, except within narrow limits. It may be suggested, as we have seen, by symbols and images. But it may best be grasped in the act of worship.