

A Pastoral Message for Advent

From Most Rev Anthony Fisher OP, Bishop of Parramatta, 2011

Blessed Fra Angelico, the early renaissance Dominican and patron of artists, is my favourite painter. I recently gave two illustrated talks on the theology of his art for the Parramatta Institute for Mission. People in the audience said they felt transported to another world by his paintings.

One of his most astonishing works is painted for this time of the liturgical year – one year's end and a new year's Advent. It is a *Last Judgment*, painted in the 1430s for the Florentine Camaldolese convent of Santa Maria degli Angeli.

The detail demonstrates his skills as a young miniaturist, now experimenting in larger works with perspective, portraiture, architecture, nature painting – above all preaching through art.

At the centre is, of course, Jesus. Not Jesus the teacher, healer or guide, not Jesus the enfleshed baby God or the dying Redeemer, though Angelico painted all these at different times.

No, this work is of Christ the King, Judge at the end of ages. His courtiers are the angels and saints, including a disproportionate number of Dominicans (Angelico has his biases!). At Christ's right hand is, of course, the Blessed Virgin, her arms crossed on her bosom, turning to her Son and making her last intercession for miserable sinners.

The graves are smashed open below and the dead rising to new life. On the left side of the throne, some are led to hell, by horrible demons that would have delighted and terrified the children.

Hell's cauldrons are not a pretty sight: the dark horror of high gothic art and literature are here, with people gnawing their own flesh in boiling cauldrons, one for each deadly sin. There are ordinary people here, but princes too and prelates, and again, in disproportionate numbers in each cauldron, friars and clerics.

Four last things: death and judgment, heaven and hell. The readings in the November liturgies are full of foreboding of such things. Even as we peel away layers of fertile apocalyptic imagination we cannot escape the insistence of the texts that Christ will come again, in glory and power, to the angst of some and the consolation of others.

These texts are intended to confront us. Christ comes to us, or we to Him, to the ruin of some and when most are not quite ready. So there is anxiety in the artful texts: nations in distress, men fainting in fear, signs in the heavens.

We are not altogether prepared to be confronted with the whole truth about ourselves. Angelico's Christ is encircled with an aura of bright-shining angels as if He were the Sun. His bright beams reveal the truth and beauty and goodness in each soul – and the more mediocre, more mundane, more sordid too.

For so many of these souls, as for us, so much is yet incomplete when judgment comes. So often we have been less than we could be or should be. The autobiography we've been writing since conception has its highlights and its regrets. There are places in ourselves, our families, friendships, workplaces, city where there is still so much to be done, so much promise yet unfulfilled, so many missed opportunities and wrong turns taken.

But Advent's punctuation is no gruesome full-stop or even an exclamation mark, but a return, the return of Jesus, a new paragraph with the One who is God-with-us, God-for-us, God-one-of-us, the God which every human heart most fundamentally craves and to whose return in glory unready Christians have nonetheless always looked forward, in expectant prayer.

He declares unequivocally that He has come that we might have life, life to the full. The fullest participation in everything that is good is offered to us, if only we will embrace God's holy will now, right now, and forever.

At the right side of the throne is one of Angelico's most beautiful scenes: the heavenly gate. He fixes it in a beautiful renaissance garden, for the garden of Eden, God's first gift to humanity after life itself, is also promised us again at the end. Paradise Lost is Paradise Regained. Amidst all the beauties of creation Angelico places angels dancing in a circle; saints, the picture of health, clothed in glorious vestments; thousands streaming through the gates of heaven.

Angelico's splendid vision is like a reward scheme for a virtuous life and must have been especially consoling for those who were dying or grieving. But it is intended for us all, as are the texts about Christ's first Advent and His new Advent as our King. He comes again to draw us, finally, to Himself and to glory. Let us run to Him, even as we cry out: *Come, O Come, Emmanuel!*

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