

**Sermon on Advent Sunday,  
28 November 2021  
by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader**

*Luke 21 v 27: Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory.*

Quiz time: 3 points for the name the song, the artist who had the chart hit, and the songwriter!

*Bows and flows of angel hair  
And ice cream castles in the air  
And feathered canyons everywhere  
I've looked at clouds that way*

(Both sides now, Judy Collins, Joni Mitchell – 1967, but some of you will know it from the film 'Love Actually'.)

What did Jesus have in his mind when he spoke of the coming of the Son of Man, coming in cloud?

Deep into the Gospel story, on the eve of the Last Supper, Jesus abandons his folksy, story-telling voice and speaks, just for one chapter, in a different language - the language of Apocalypics.

Apocalyptic writing was a popular genre in the last

couple of centuries BC. The two examples that we know best are the book of Daniel, and the book of Revelation. There were many more that did not find a home in Christian tradition. It is in the book of Daniel that we meet the figure of the Son of Man, a name that Jesus seems to identify with.

Apocalyptic writing gave a voice to the oppressed and discontented. By telling of weird creatures and strange goings on in the skies and the seas, they were able to talk of the fall of past empires, and speak hopefully of the fall of current empires.

I am always critical of those who tried to read the Bible as a kind of complicated code, a cryptic crossword which we can solve if only we can work out the clues – but I make an exception here. Apocalyptic writing is a kind of code, a hidden message of protest, because its writers knew they would face terrible penalties if the ruling powers worked out what they were really saying.

Apocalyptic writing tells of impending times of great distress and upheaval, sweetened with a promise of peace, justice and victory for those who stay faithful to the end.

And so the guardians of our lectionary offer us these passages on Advent Sunday, the beginning of the season when the Church traditionally turns its thoughts to preparation, not for Christmas and the first coming

of Christ, but to his return in Glory at the end of the age.

Apocalyptic writing always raises a central question. When will these things be?

For Jesus, the answer to that question was – now! The signs of the times were there to be read. The Kingdom of God was very near.

But what might the answer be for us. I would suggest that the answer is the same. It is now.

Let's go back to those signs in the sky. Clouds. When I was a child my great passion in life was cricket. Long summer holidays and summer weekends were to be spent at cricket grounds, or with the radio tuned to Test Match Special. There were three words that hung like the sword of Damocles over my fragile happiness, especially when the game was up in Manchester or Leeds: Rain stopped play.

There was a popular saying amongst the regulars at Old Trafford – the cricket ground, not the soccer stadium: If you can see the Pennines from the Stretford Road end, it's going to rain. If you can't see the Pennines, it's raining already!

Like the clouds above Manchester, the signs of the

times are always with us. There are wars and rumours of wars. There always have been. Political and economic structures crack and shudder. There are plagues – but we call them pandemics now. Jesus speaks of people trembling at the roaring of the sea and the waves. Are extreme weather events and rising sea levels also signs of the times?

And when we see the signs of the times, we have Jesus' promise: the Kingdom of God is very near.

I want to say more about clouds. Jesus talks of the Son of Man appearing in cloud with power and glory. 'Lo he comes with clouds descending'? Well, much as I love Charles Wesley's great Advent hymn, it doesn't quite fit here. It is too easy to picture fluffy white clouds serving as a kind of celestial elevator, bringing our God from a distant heaven to sort everything out at the end.

I don't see clouds that way.


Have you ever been lost in a cloud? Back in September my son Chris and I, and his girlfriend Holly, set out up Mam na Gualain from the banks of Lochleven. We expected cloud, and we got it. There are few well-worn paths on the less popular peaks of the West Highlands. You can't just follow the footprints of others. When the clouds come down and the visibility goes, you look to your map and compass. You have no other guide. Even

the experienced and well-equipped fell walker should feel a frisson of anxiety, and keep the senses alert. You have to keep going. You can't just wait it out. The cloud can stay all day. And yet at intervals, you will be reminded why you are there, as the wind blows a hole in the sheet of grey, and you see the summit ahead of you, the mountain landscape around you, the loch 2,500 feet below you, the place you set out from so many miles behind you.

And, of course, you don't just see where you are going, you see where you are. You are not always where you expect to be.

And that is how I imagine the Son of Man coming in cloud. In all the uncertainties and challenges of mortal life, the difficult decisions made in faith with the best tools we've got, the wrong paths and energy-sapping detours, our Lord is not far away on his cloud above us. He shares our clouds. He knows that life cannot wait for dry and sunny days. We will walk through the cloud, and we will not always be as well equipped, or as careful as we could be. And his path will not be far from ours, even when we cannot see Him. In the clouds of life, the Kingdom of God is near. And by and by, the wind will part the clouds, or perhaps it is the breath of the Spirit, and we will see Him. And we will know where we are, where we are going, and who we are and whose we are.

I look on clouds that way. Amen.



'In the clouds of life,  
the Kingdom of God  
is near.'