



## The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter - December 2007

### **LET ALL MORTAL FLESH KEEP SILENCE**

**P**ERHAPS THE oldest form of the Eucharist that has come down to us is the Liturgy of St James, partly known to us through the well-known hymn 'Let all mortal flesh keep silence'. After 1700 or 1800 years, a version of the Liturgy of St James, thought to have its origins in Jerusalem, is still around in Syria and India. What we notice is how ancient, and therefore time-honoured, are the ideas and themes in the hymn.

Most people wouldn't think of 'Let all mortal flesh' as an Advent hymn. It's in the 'Holy Communion' section of most hymn books and is clearly about the way Christ comes to us in the Eucharist: 'He will give to all the faithful / His own self for heavenly food'. But look too at the Advent themes! 'Christ our God to earth descendeth ...'. 'As of old on earth he stood'. 'As the Light of light descendeth'. There is even a battle between Light and Dark and a final reckoning with evil: 'That the powers of hell may vanish / As the darkness clears away'. And we are caught up with the banquet of heaven: 'At his feet the six-winged seraph; / Cherubim with sleepless eye ...'.

So what do we make of the Coming of Christ? Of Advent? There are often reckoned to be three different 'comings'. 'In the first coming', wrote St Bernard in his fifth Sermon for Advent, Christ 'comes in the flesh and in weakness; in the second he comes in spirit and in power; in the third he comes in glory and in majesty'. Or, as Peter de Blois, a twelfth century French scholar, puts it, Jesus came as a lamb, he will come again as a lion and, meanwhile, comes to us as 'the tenderest of friends'.

Since the earliest times, as the Liturgy of St James shows, Christians have seen the Mass as this 'second coming', the coming to us of Jesus as 'the tenderest of friends'. In St Bernard's words, 'the second coming is the means whereby we pass from the first (Bethlehem) to the third (the Day of Judgment)'. No wonder, in the Eucharistic Prayer, we sing 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'. No wonder we are invited to Communion with a ringing declaration of Christ's Presence in our midst: 'Behold the Lamb of God ... .Blessed are those called to the banquet of the Lamb'.

The Greek word for 'coming' – *parousia* – also means 'presence'. As well as the *parousia* at Christmas, and the *parousia* of the Son of Man at the End of Time (see Matt.24:27), we celebrate therefore the *parousia* – the 'coming' and the 'presence' - of Christ our God at the Mass. He descends to and stands in our midst 'as of old on earth he stood'. The daily bread event is a miracle. Advent, in many ways, is like Lent. Purple vestments. Time for amendment of life. Fasting before the great feast. But, in one respect, Advent is very different. We can sing the hymn 'Let all mortal flesh' – or listen to Bairstow's glorious anthem on the same text – and exult in these triumphant words: 'Alleluia, alleluia, / Alleluia, Lord most high!'

Wishing you a happy Advent and a holy and blessed Christmas.

+ Andrew Ebbsfleet

**The Bishop of Ebbsfleet**  
**Bishop's House, Dry Sandford, Abingdon, OXON OX13 6JP**  
**Tel: +44 (0) 1865 390746**  
[www.ebbsfleet.org.uk](http://www.ebbsfleet.org.uk)