

There is not a moment when Christ is not present. It's a monk's role, partly, to know this presence by forever being aware of it, and the best preparation for this awareness is a pure heart and a clean conscience, so you see there's always a lot work to do. But, at its best, it does mean that one lives in a world alive with God; that there is no one and no thing, no incident or experience, that isn't telling one something of God. It's like putting on a pair of new spectacles and suddenly everything comes into focus and one realises what one has been missing. This doesn't usually last for long and I'm forever wiping the lenses clean and occasionally having to go for a new pair. Advent is a chance to do this, to bring life back into focus, and it's best done by focussing on death. Now, wait a minute, we're building up to Christmas here! The last things we need is more misery! But this passage in Mark immediately precedes the Passion and is the tail end of a very apocalyptic series of warnings. Watch out, death is at the door – or rather, a day of reckoning, of judgement, of salvation for the good and condemnation for the bad. This is our real, lived situation, always, but we spin it out in the hope that it will come later – like Augustine's deferral of celibacy – not yet, Lord. But this is not our call. It's a perennial – and however much we attenuate the danger it's here, now, and always has been. This is to take incarnation seriously. We look forward to Christ's coming at Christmas because Christ has already come. We look forward to Christ's Second Coming because Christ has already come. Or do we? For we associate one with a beginning – the joy of new birth – and the other with ending – the fear of death. But it's all one event: Epiphany, Parousia, Apocalypse rolled into one – and history, too, in this sense, is timeless. Our present Covid setting has highlighted this dynamic in a very important and precious way. Meeting at Christmas is no longer just about consuming more, a culmination of a whole false take on what it means to be here, but realising our love for one another in time of death. And if you think this is overly dramatic just raise your eyes above the parapet of Covid and see the clouds of climate change rapidly approaching. The time for love, for Christ, is now and always has been. It's a way of seeing, best prepared for with a pure heart and a clean conscience.

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