

The Christian Agnostic

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the first Sunday of Advent, December 3, 1995. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The Christian Agnostic! I asked three people what the term meant. One said a Christian agnostic is someone from a Christian culture who's not a believer. Another said that a Christian agnostic is somebody who's anti-Christian. A third said that a Christian agnostic is a jerk. I'm not using the term in any of those ways. How am I using it? Let's break it down into two parts.

First, what's an agnostic? Thomas Huxley, the British philosopher, coined the word in 1870. Huxley rejected the Christian faith but he wasn't an atheist. An atheist says, "There is no God". Huxley wasn't that dogmatic. He called himself an agnostic. The word "agnostic" comes from a Greek word meaning, "I don't know." "I don't know if God exists", Huxley said. "I'm an agnostic."

So, what's a *Christian* agnostic? About sixty years ago a British preacher, Leslie Weatherhead, wrote a book entitled, The Christian Agnostic. Weatherhead wanted to reach out to agnostics like Huxley. He tried to find a point of contact with agnostics. In his book he said Christians have something in common with agnostics. There are many things that Christians simply don't know about God and we shouldn't pretend to know.

So what's a Christian agnostic? A Christian agnostic trusts in Christ. A Christian agnostic prays with Alfred Lord Tennyson,

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,

By faith, and faith alone, embrace,
Believing where we cannot prove.

So - a Christian agnostic trusts Christ. But a Christian agnostic is also agnostic about some things. Tennyson goes on to say,

We have but faith: we cannot know,
For knowledge is of things we see:
And yet we trust it comes from thee,
A beam in darkness: let it grow.

A Christian agnostic is not a narrow, dogmatic, "know it all". The Christian agnostic says with St. Paul, "We know only in part." And when Christian agnostics go through tough times, they cry out with Job, "*Oh, that I knew* where I might find God in this tragedy." "I don't know where God is in this situation. I don't have the answers. *Oh, that I did.*" And the Christian agnostic journeys into the uncertain future like Abraham who obeyed God and set out "*not knowing* where he was going."

Jesus said some things to encourage Christian agnostics. For example, in the Gospel of Matthew he says, "*No one knows* about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." We don't know what the future holds. As Christians, we're agnostic about the details of the future. Because of this we reject astrology and fortune tellers and seances and horoscopes and psychics because they claim to know what we have no right to know.

We don't know what the future holds. Therefore we must stay alert and be ready for whatever happens. "Thieves don't send engraved announcements to alert you" (Willimon) when they're coming, says Jesus. And that's the way God is. That's the way

life is. Sometimes it comes upon us like a thief in the night. We don't know what the future holds - whether plenty or want, joy or sorrow, sickness or health. But Jesus warns us to keep awake. "You must be ready" he warns.

And how do we ready ourselves? For one thing, I'm keeping my insurance paid up. But Jesus says there are some other things. Unlike those whom the flood swept away, we can respond in faith and obedience to the preaching of the Word of God. We can trust our lives to Jesus Christ in risky ways. And we can keep busy doing the work we know Christ wants us to do - whether its grinding meal or working in the fields or at a desk. And we can put our house in order. There are people we need to tell we love before it's too late. There are letters we need to send before its too late. There are people we need to become reconciled with before its too late. Don't wait to do what is really urgent and important! Don't wait! There are so many unimportant things we think we need to do. But they're unimportant. Do what is really important and urgent.

We don't know what the future holds. We're agnostic about it. But we're also Christians. We trust that the future will bring to us the very One who has already come to us - who died for our us, who was raised for us, who reigns in heaven for us, who prays for us.

Let us pray: Faithful God, your promises stand unshaken through all generations. Renew us in hope, that we may be awake and alert watching for the glorious return of Jesus Christ, our judge and savior, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.