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Isolation Radio Talk

Sunday 29 November  
Theme: **Advent Sunday**

**It is one, single light, it burns - in darkness.**

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Good Morning

I say it this year as gently as I may, not subdued, but filled with all the faith and hope I have.

Happy New year!

In the Christian calendar, the new year, this day, Advent Sunday, begins again the re-telling of the relationship between you and God; it begins again the story of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Do not neglect Advent I beg you. In this year of our Lord 2020, Advent overwhelmingly is a season for our times. Advent always begins in darkness; this year, the darkness is COVID-19 infected; it is intense; there is no light. Then, in that darkness, I offer you just a single light, a lone candle; a light to be shared until everywhere is lit; you *shall* see again.

Be sure! Advent will pull you to look in two directions. Advent touches a universal longing for God, given its wonderful voice in the Hebrew Scripture. Such a longing, so deep within all humankind, has its dark side. Advent speaks of dread; 'men will faint with terror at the thought of all that is coming upon the world', said Jesus; Christmas tells of the hope and joy in the life of a baby. Advent says, pilgrim on planet earth, you will one-day die. Christmas says, pilgrim, there is peace beyond understanding.

Advent reminds you, man or woman of faith, that one day you will be judged; not by the values of this world, nor by that cloak of righteousness with which you cover yourself. You will be judged as you really are; by the one who knows who you really are; a light shines on things you hoped you alone knew. Pray you will be judged, not by what you deserve, but according to the mercy and graciousness of God.

A faith for today says that 'God is love'; yet you know evil is real. Can God be disappointed; be angry; is there a place for hell in your understanding of the Christian faith? I struggle with this, I really do. You see there is an immediate difficulty. Evil, hatred and violence are the setting for the story of your faith. The stage of salvation begins and ends with violence. Without the violence of Christ's death there would be nothing to tell; the story of a birth in Bethlehem ends as Herod massacres children. The last pages of Holy Scripture are blood-soaked; the story is of a great war in heaven.

In a society where all is entertainment; even the news of pandemic, of war and rumour of war, is sanitised and selective; you must make up your mind about hell. The Bible talks about hell; it is nearly always expressed in picture, or by comparison. You must separate the picture from the truth it tells. Your picture now will be different from the way our ancestors thought of it in

Blagdon, Ubley or Compton Martin 500 years ago. It is not about fire and brimstone; it is about the *absence* of God.

Jesus spoke a great deal about His kingdom and about His peace. He framed it in relation to this world. The French Theologian Girard reminds you that in the story of Creation, the earth was 'without form and void', so says the book of Genesis. Then, at Creation, there was explosive violence beyond comprehension. If chaos is a distortion of peace, God must bring you back to peace through violence; that is the message of the book of Revelation. And some of us will find this so difficult. It may be because we will not look at the unpalatable truth that we are still at the dawn of a new Creation.

Can it be any other way. The judgement of God is already present; that is why you speak about the consequences of sin working out in history. Think of the great danger to planet earth; of conflicts and oppression of people throughout the world; these never seem to end; the causes lie so far back you cannot own responsibility; they are conflicts of the human condition that are told for Christians in the books of our Scripture.

The judgement of God goes beyond the present moment, beyond the story of the past, on to the end of all time. Still I ask, what is God like? The idea of a 'nice' God can only be the figment of my woolly imagination. Perhaps it can only be a projection on the screen of the world, with pathetic illusions about goodness, freedom, and that humankind will, in the end, act rationally. That life is unjust for many cannot be gainsaid; the innocent do suffer; the wicked do prosper; the evil die in their beds, the good, a martyr's death; the rich seem favoured and the poor remain oppressed. Your soul cries out that God must, *God must*, be angry. If God is not, then God stands accused himself as an accomplice to injustice and to violence.

These things lead to the present moment. Most immediately I am caught up in Advent by reading the last book of the Christian Scripture, the Revelation of St John. I think too of my father's and mother's life, before me and brother arrived, and my own lifetime; the horrors beyond imagining inflicted by one human being on another, by one race on another, and often in the name of twisted, perverted religion. A theologian from Kosovo, Miroslav Volf, pulls no punches. 'Imagine' he says, 'speaking about a Christian attitude to violence; among your audience are those whose villages and homes have been burned to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit'. You might need to live in comfortable Somerset to believe in neither the wrath, nor the judgement of God. In the place where the blood of the innocent has been spilt you cannot cry peace where there is no peace.

The judgement of God is ever present; it is *not* comfortable. I do not doubt that death will confront me with the truth; I shall not be able to claim ignorance of the charges; judgement will know all that has gone before; it will show me who I really am in God's sight. God grant there will be no turning his back on me then. What I know now, is that the challenge of salvation, is to live in the light of faith, in the hope, that is the gospel. It is one single light, it burns - in darkness.

Thank you for listening

## **Prayer**

Let us pray to God, the one single light, burning in the darkness,

We pray for those caught up in wars around the world;  
soldiers, refugees and those who hold fast  
to the reasons for the fighting...

We pray for homeless folk  
- excluded from what the rest of us are doing,  
cold, struggling to keep a hold of who they are...

We pray for folk who are ill,  
coping with pain, fearing the worst,  
and fo those in the NHS who worry for the future...

We pray for those folk struggling in relationships,  
especially at this 'family time',  
when the cracks are just below the surface...

And for the deepest hopes of our hearts, we pray now...

### *Silence is kept*

Into the mess of this world a fragile child will come -  
yelling in the night for his mother,  
needing milk and clean linen...

We pin our hopes on you, little baby,  
our God  
- pushed out into the world  
through pain and into poverty.

Our God is with us and our hope is re-born.  
Amen.