

Isolation Radio Talk

Same God now as the God of the past and the God of the future

Good Morning on what the Church celebrates as the third Sunday of Advent.

Advent is a Latin word; it means 'coming towards'; in years past you have looked at the calendar and realised that Christmas is coming towards you with the speed of an express train; so much to do; so little time. Not this year though! I have heard it said 'Christmas is cancelled'. I really do have to say that is absolute rubbish; Christmas cannot be cancelled; never, never, never. How you celebrate Christmas may be different, this year at least; but cancelled? No! What I hope it might do, is take you back to the meaning of Christmas; echoing the words of the writer of St John's Gospel that 'God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, that everyone who has faith in him may not perish but have everlasting life' (John 3.16).

This year Advent chimes so well with the present mood so clearly seen, so deeply felt. It is a sombre and anxious time. That is why, when you began this short season two weeks ago, I wanted you to think of darkness; not the darkness of night; but utter, utter darkness. It is the sort of darkness I would like to create in an Advent Carol Service; I would invite you to be in church and, as a clock strikes there would be utter darkness; silence; the dark and the silence grips your imagination; would there ever be light again? In your imagination now, go back to the very first moment so wonderfully described by the poet writer of the book of Genesis; 'the earth was without form and void'; 'great darkness covered the earth' (Genesis 1.2).

There you have it; utter, complete darkness. But wait, far, far away, just a flicker, the flicker of a candle; it comes towards you; you hold out your candle; it is lit; soon the whole church is filled with Advent light. That light is the light of hope; the light of life coming into the darkness of these days. Whatever befalls, you should know that darkness will never overcome light.

The story unfolds. 'There was a man sent by God' says St John (John 1.6), 'he came to bear witness to the light that was even then coming into the world'. That witness was John the Baptist; wild in appearance, it seems, but not insane; he understood that he was standing on the very edge of something shattering, some direct intervention of God; he was 'the voice crying in the wilderness', predicted by the Prophet Isaiah centuries before (Isaiah 40.3); his voice reminded people of the covenant between God and God's people; that the covenant had conditions attached.

What a remote and vanished world it all is. I do not easily understand what is meant by Isaiah's prophecies or the cries of John the Baptist; to be fair he was not too sure himself; he sent a message to Jesus to ask if he was indeed the one for whom they waited. Yet those ideas, those dreams, they simmered away in the early years of the Christian Church; it is no easier now to understand the cataclysmic intervention of God in human history. So great, so awesome is the thought of God's intervention that you probably *can* only see God as a baby born in a stable; as angels who sing to the poorest and despised of all in society, the shepherds; Magi who follow a star and bring gifts. Yes, Jesus is a gift to be unwrapped and treasured; a gift for life – a gift of life.

Religion can be false, I know that; it can promote illusion and fantasy and belief in what simply cannot be and is not true. Religion can exploit the vulnerable in highly damaging ways. None-the-less, the consequence of Christ remains now what originally it was, when Jesus told John's disciples, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see'. It is summarised by St Paul as the peace that goes far, far beyond any human understanding or any attempt at analysis.

There is a danger in accepting that important Christian teaching: God who comes to us at Christmas; Jesus who is Emanuel – God with us. The danger lurks that you may not give sufficient emphasis to the Cross; to Resurrection; to the reality of sin and to forgiveness.

There are important things to understand. One of these is to locate the wonderful event of the Saviour breaking into the world in a particular time and place. You learn lessons about God and God's great love; you draw both comfort and meaning; but you need to avoid making Christmas an indulgence; a search for real or imagined perfection; an escape from reality; a festival of gross consumption, before awful reality returns. It is an onerous task; one that the circumstances of this COVID-19 infected Christmas may oblige you to accept.

There is another thread to consider. Theology passionately upholds the unique gift and presence of Christ in Holy Scripture - the Word made Flesh – yet you see, if you look carefully, the divine presence working in the world throughout history and today. That divine presence; The Word, as St John calls him; the Emmanuel, works in the hearts and minds of all who struggle with the moral and political issues of each generation. I do not doubt for one moment that God is present in the moral issues that confront you; in the choices you make each day; in the wonderful discoveries and, God willing, advances in understanding, of the world and human nature.

The Christian to be true must say that these are the working of The Word in human mind, reason, conscience. The Divine Word speaks in all creation. You know a deeply dark side; that common diagnosis in scripture, of deafness and blindness; that preference for darkness to light; to ignore the poor and powerless, the weak and the dis-eased.

The task of the Christian and the Church, is to make known by word and by deed that the God who is to be discerned in the world now, is the same God who comes to us, a light burning in the darkness, in the child of Bethlehem, and in the peace or anguish of your own hearts.

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 for 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.

[*'Pinning our hopes on Jesus'*, from *Cloth for the Cradle*, Wild Goose Worship Group; p54-55]