

Jonathan Aitken's Sermon 3rd December 2017 (Advent Sunday)
St. Matthew's Westminster
Readings: Isaiah 64: 1 – 9, Corinthians 1: 3 – 9, Mark 13: 24 - end

"Will we enter the season of Advent with faith or with fear?"

This was the challenging question put to our congregation by Father Jamie in his Sermon here two Sundays ago.

So let me pick up his gauntlet with the help, or arguably with the hindrance, of today's readings.

For they remind us that our instinctively joyful preparations for the Adventus or coming of Jesus Christ need to be tempered by a realisation that this season of the church is also marked by ambivalent signposts.

Some of the signposts point back towards darkness as well as forwards into the light.

So to thoughtful Christians, Advent is a time of mixed messages which need to be prayerfully interpreted.

Our reading from Mark's Gospel contains some of the gloomiest forebodings ever voiced by our Lord.

He warns us in apocalyptic language that there will be great suffering:

"In those days the sun will be darkened...

The moon will not give its light...

The stars will be falling...

And the power in the heavens will be shaken"

Then let's look at our first reading from the Book of Isaiah whose Messianic prophecies in its early chapters usually ring out so cheerfully during Advent, with tidings of comfort and joy such as:

"Every valley shall be exalted...
Unto us a child is born...
And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed"

Yet today's Isaiah reading is very different in tone for it gives us dire warnings that the mountains are quaking because the Lord is so angry with his people, that he has hidden his face from them.

Some of us have noticed that preachers here at St Matthew's have a recurring tendency, every so often, to complain that their particular Sunday readings are rather difficult.

If I ever meet the compiler of the Church of England Lectionary I would surely echo this grumble about today's Advent Sunday's readings.

And yet the Scriptures are of course right.

There is a dark side to Advent.

There certainly was in the First Advent — for example when the tyrant Herod had all the new born babies of Bethlehem slaughtered and John the Baptist beheaded.

Even at the holiest moment of Advent, the Annunciation the Angel Gabriel felt it necessary to preface his message with the words:

“Do not be afraid, Mary”

As well he might have done because in those primitive first century times in the Hill Country of Judea, unmarried mothers were often stoned to death.

But Mary pondered in her heart on the angel's message and responded with perfect obedience and Godly surrender.

“Let it be with me according to your word” she replied in faith rather than in fear.

Mary's example plants its own sign posts down the millennia. She guides us on how we might respond to our present difficulties, worries and disappointments if, as so often happens, we are taken out of the superficial Advent comfort zones of carols, pop up calendars and mince pies and have to grapple with the deeper pressures of real life, eloquently characterised by Archbishop Cranmer as

“Trouble, Sorrow, Need, Sickness or any other adversity”.

Let me be personal for a moment.

It is almost exactly 20 years since I first became a regular member of the congregation of St Matthew's. I well remember my first Advent here as I joined this wonderfully inclusive and welcoming Christian family.

But I was full of fear.

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To the outside world having just lost my seat in Parliament and an ill-fated libel case, in the law courts, I was a notorious pariah in the media.

I was in the vortex of a downward spiral which I have described as:
"Defeat, Disgrace, Divorce, Bankruptcy and Jail".

This was a royal flush of crises by anyone's standards and they all came true.

Not a single one of my Advent 1997 prayers for these thunderbolts to be avoided or even alleviated appeared to be answered.

In his Advent Sunday sermon at that time Father Philip cited, as he so often does, a remarkable book *The Coming of God* by Maria Boulding. I honour this St Matthew's tradition today by highlighting these words by Sister Boulding on her central theme of Advent as a season of waiting:

I quote:

"We sometimes have to go on doing the small ordinary things while we wait for God – as Mary did while she waited for the birth of Jesus.

It may sometimes be more fruitful if we wait by growing slowly towards wisdom rather than trying to find a quick answer partly dictated by our own desires.

The waiting changes us, schools us and teaches us to know God".

In the Advent after hearing that sermon by Father Philip my next place of waiting was a prison cell.

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That sounds difficult – and it was – and yet, in the sombre surroundings of HMP Belmarsh I discovered, as monks have done down the centuries, that cells can be good places in which to pray, to listen and wait for God.

My next interesting career change was to head off to the only institution in Britain which had worse food and worse plumbing than a prison – an Anglican theological college – Wycliffe Hall Oxford.

There I had two marvellous years reading Theology as a resident undergraduate, before returning to St Matthew's where my greatest joy was to be married here at this altar to my beloved Elizabeth.

And we have lived, within this community, and supported by the prayers of this community, happily ever after.

What a blessing to have travelled steadily through 20 Advents from fear and darkness to faith and light.

Although my personal journey makes a rather too colourful illustration of the point I am trying to make.

Away from public headlines and into private hearts, I suspect one might find that almost everyone's spiritual journey sooner or later contains darkness as well as light.

For negative forces are always with us.

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In today's secular world the unsettling and volatile nature of politics, economics, divisiveness, intolerance, trolls and twitter all seem increasingly disturbing.

And even the spiritual world has its dark Valleys.

To give you a reminder of this, drawn straight from today's service, you might think that exquisitely beautiful church music like Byrd's Mass for Four Voices could not possibly have a dark side.

But you would be wrong.

Because history teaches us for decades after the Reformation, merely being in possession of musical settings of the Catholic Mass was an arrestable offence.

William Byrd himself lived in fear for many years, never daring to publish these masses as a complete set. To avoid imprisonment, he released them clandestinely as single sheets of music because in that form they were easier to conceal from the persecutors and prosecutors.

So alas there is nothing new about religious persecution which around the world today is tragically at an all-time high from the Rohingyas in Myanmar to the Christians in Iraq.

I don't want to sound like an Advent doom monger. Don't get me wrong. I love to Ding Dong Merrily on High along with everyone else. So far I'm booked to attend eight carol services, three of them here at St Matthews.

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I'm going to a performance of *The Messiah* in the Albert Hall with my daughters. I will eat plenty of mince pies.

I adore the joyful side of the run up to Christmas.

But if we neglect the shadows of this season we also neglect important elements in the mystery of Christ's coming.

We cannot avoid the real world, the commercial world or even the cruel world around us.

How then should we live and what should we do to get the balance of Advent right?

This may perhaps be the wrong question for it presupposes that doing something, taking initiatives, becoming hyper-active, should form part of our action plans for Advent.

Instead we might say to ourselves, as the Simon and Garfunkel song puts it:

"Slow down, you're going too fast"

For our 21st century problem is that we live in an age of impatience.

We allow ourselves to become unsettled by trivia – for example, if we are delayed in traffic jams, or if we can't get online instantly.

We need to use Advent to recognise that waiting can be a Godly process, and that patience is a Christian virtue.

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If anyone wants to go deeper into this subject I recommend two books:

The Stature of Waiting by W. H. Vanstone

Or Do Nothing – Christmas is Coming by Bishop Stephen Cottrell

In their very different ways, both of them say, as the ancient Psalmists so frequently do, that there are great strengths and great blessings in learning to wait for the Lord.

And this perhaps brings us towards a possible answer to Father Jamie's question.

For fear and faith can complement each other in advent. So can darkness and light.

In old Biblical languages Fear did not mean abject terror. It meant Godly respect.

"The Fear of the Lord is the Beginning of Wisdom" says Proverbs.

"For with you there is forgiveness – Therefore you are feared" says Psalm 130.

We may have to learn this in the deeper valleys of our spiritual journeys of discovery.

As I well know, waiting during the dark moment of Advent is not easy.

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But to end on an optimistic note, harken to this verse from the 139th Psalm – often called the crown of Psalms – which expresses this beautiful thought about waiting for God in dark times.

“If I say surely the darkness shall cover me
And the light around me become night
Even the darkness is not dark to you
The night is as bright as the day
For darkness is as light to you”

So whatever our mood or our moment as we enter this Holy season of Advent, let us “Keep awake” as Mark’s Gospel exhorts us, giving thanks and praise that we are celebrating the coming of a God to whom:

“Darkness is as light to you”

Amen