

Sunday 27 November 2005 at 6.30pm: Advent Sunday

Who's in Charge?

*"Then the glory of the Lord went out from the threshold of the house of God".
Ezekiel 10:18*

'Is he dead?' she asked, looking at Ruben's glorious depiction of Samson, prostrate in Delilah's lap. 'No not dead, just asleep,' I said cheerfully – and retold the story of Delilah's seductive powers and Samson's shorn locks to Hannah, aged nearly four – and various other National Gallery visitors. She was still wrestling with the concept of hair loss equating loss of strength when we were joined by her father, who'd come, in a stunningly appropriate coincidence, via a session at the gym and a haircut.

For a split second the possibility of Daddy without his strength visibly shadowed Hannah's mind. No more shoulder rides across the park at breakneck speed, or breath-squeezing bear hugs or easy swings up onto a carousel horse. A Daddy with no strength and her world would not ever be the same.

In his book *The Company of Strangers*, Paul Seabright explores the emergence of our economic institutions and how they influence the affairs of the world. He recalls the query of a Russian official two years after the break-up of the Soviet Union. 'We need to understand the fundamental details of how a market system works. Tell me, for example: who is in charge of the supply of bread to the population of London?'

Who is in charge? Is anyone? If so, do they number amongst their concerns our needs, our safety, our wellbeing? If the answer, miraculously, is yes, do they actually have the power to make a difference? Or is that primeval hope of an ultimate and powerful something - beyond me yet connected with me – an unhappy illusion?

Advent, with its uncertainty, its chaos, its images of conflict, judgment, eternal light and fathomless darkness, resounds with these questions.

At the end of a year that has seen the aftermath of the Asian Tsunami, terrorist bombings across the world and here in London, floods in the Southern States, the earthquake in Kashmir, and countless personal tragedies, many of which won't have hit the news, the questions are as compelling as ever. Yet the Hungarian film director Béla Tarr once said 'The more desperate we are, the more hope there is'. Humanity has a tremendous capacity to hold on to hope in the direst of circumstances, and Advent has something of that sense about it too. Maybe that tenacity is more than a manifestation of reality avoidance and human wishful thinking. Perhaps in moments of desperation we're grasping at a truth and not just a straw.

So how have people experienced God's glory in history, and what glimpses are we afforded in the complex maelstrom of world events and our own lives?

Beyond the wilderness, Moses stumbled across God's glory. It blazed amongst the scrub but didn't destroy it. It demanded that he remove his shoes. We encounter the heat of God's glory in uncomfortable questions about our lives in community with one another - and we take off our shoes in repentance. Isaiah prophesied that in the

desert the Lord would level the ground - all people would experience his presence. In our desert moments, months, years, we discover our utter dependence, and if we survive that leveling perhaps encounter God.

For King David, God's power and glory were everywhere but in some very specific way rested in the Temple. In the colour, texture and play of our religious celebrations, we sometimes glimpse God dancing amongst the candle flames, enticing us to join in. For Isaiah again, God's power is manifest in the servant figure of the Messiah, who won't bruise a single reed, so tender is his love. The unexpected care of a stranger can connect an ordinary day with the extraordinary grace of God's love.

Matthew's apocalyptic images remind us that the most incomprehensible events can prove to have the mark of God's presence. Paul sets before the Corinthians Christ crucified – crushed, powerless in worldly terms. We've seen that kind of glory in the remarkable words and faces of those who have survived bombs and other unspeakable human tragedy. Finally, in the book of Revelation we are given that image of the tree of life whose medicinal leaves heal the nations. Wherever we witness a coming to wholeness – of mind, body or soul - there is the nourishing presence of God's power.

The front of last year's Advent Carol Service sheet carried a painting not by Rubens but by Hannah Lain, aged at the time nearly 3. We were given some words, Hannah and I - the words of a poet. And they were good words, and they were quirky words, and they were random, in a way, and in another way connected. And we took some sponges, and some paint, and some brushes, and we had a dialogue - which sometimes connected and sometimes didn't.

And I didn't know whether I understood the poem, and Hannah wasn't in the least bit interested in anything but the paint – but somehow God breathed through the words, and encouraged the artist, and probably wished the mother would butt out - and something was created, and made sense, and made no sense, and was ordered, and was chaos, had darkness, energy and space, and was glorious and full of awe.

And so we enter Advent with a proper fear. Fear that maybe everything is random, life is a loose cannon, and nobody is in charge of the supply of bread to the population of London – or to Niger. Fear that if there is someone they may have lost their power, or don't have our interests at heart. Fear that they may have walked out.

'The glory of God departs ... where now do we look for God?' Ezekiel is given a vision of the Temple defiled by the elders of Israel, and he watches as the glory of the Lord departs from it. Where will we look now for that protective and ordering power that in the Temple had been so obviously in charge? If Daddy isn't powerful, and present, and the personification of invincible love, what will become of us?

Yet in desperation we are hope-filled, because we also face Advent in the knowledge that there is a story – a story of glory and power manifest in one who comes in vulnerability and wilful self-exposure, in the child born in an animal shed whose family for a time became asylum seekers - and who as a young man engaged with the people on the 'Z' list. Who had the power to change lives, who was put to death at the request of religious zealots, who transpired to be King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

And who holds us in a parental embrace that is entirely reliable and wholly unchanging – that will not fade with the vagaries of style - the cutting off of hair or the exhaustion of relentless caregiving.

‘Then the glory of the Lord went out from the threshold of the house of God. And where now shall we find it?’

*‘In burning holiness;
in gentle strength;
in all things made new;
With the power of weakness,
and in the wisdom of foolishness
your glory shall be revealed among us.’*