

Sunday 3 December 2006: First Sunday in Advent

To the Ends of the Earth

Reading: Luke 21.25-30

Like many others I have always enjoyed listening to the news on the radio. Since early childhood as I wake up I have turned on Radio 4; when I was overseas it was the World Service I listened to. What a joy it was when I was able to tune in and all the crackles and hissing ceased and I had clear reception. There is something deeply reassuring about those BBC voices reading the news and reflecting on current events. You can always tell the instant you reach the BBC World Service although you may have had to go through 100s of English speaking frequencies to get there. These voices you could recognise anywhere and they are comforting, suggesting, despite the events described that the world has an order, a familiarity, a decency and an ethical basis - that's what a voice can impart. I imagine it's a bit like those who took comfort during the Second World War by hearing the chimes Big Ben.

Yet in the last few years something for me has changed. It's not the BBC it seems to be the nature of the news we hear. It's as though the voices which read and predict and analyse can no longer contain or give order to the events they describe. Those breaking stories of death and new tragedy in Iraq or Palestine or Afghanistan fill me with a profound sense of dread. And the horror is also here in the UK with the endless news of senseless murders, knife crimes, abductions, sex offenders and scandals and politician's endless self justifications which no one seems to believe anymore (not even themselves). Then there are the stories of what we are doing to our planet, the global warming, the draughts, and the disasters. It's as if the news has gone into overload, too significant to ignore but too overwhelming to process. And so it just goes round and round and round, inescapable, weighing us down until it is dumped and we move onto the next media obsession. The news is no longer something that brings comfort or order but something which profoundly disturbs. Perhaps its right that it should but is it right that our sympathies and responses are being manipulated into a profound fear and mistrust of the world around us?

Even in Jesus' day the news was pretty grim. In Chapter 21 of Luke's Gospel the writing seems to be very much on the wall. Jesus warns of coming wars and insurrections- of nations rising up against nations, of persecutions and trials, of judgement, of opposition and worst of all he talks of betrayals which will come. Betrayal is sickening because it involves a loss of trust in the very values and people and bodies we once believed in. Someone or something we loved and depended upon but then realised had let us down, abandoned us, failed to reciprocate our love, worse handed us over to enemies, conspired against us. Betrayal can take place at all levels - betrayed by a government we believed in, leaders, companies, the church, people we love, even within our own families. When love is betrayed it becomes a painful wound which is hard to heal.

Jesus faces betrayal far more intensely than hopefully we will ever know, and on many different levels. In our Gospel reading today he is about to be betrayed by his religion; by his priests and the teachers of his law and faith; by the political system; by the courts and by the system of justice; by the ordinary people who had loved him and followed him; by his group of disciples and most especially by one of those disciples Judas who would kiss him and have him handed over into the hands of enemies. And Jesus warns his disciples and followers that they too will be betrayed in similar ways.

Yet how does Jesus respond to all of this? He tells his disciples that this very time of struggle, conflict and trial “will give the opportunity to testify” - to testify, to witness. In the very midst of pending disaster Jesus is not talking about defending oneself or safeguarding position - he is talking about opportunity, the opportunity to witness to God. It is in fact quite staggering - at the very point of least trust Jesus is actually saying that it is there where faith begins and God has room to take over. He tells them not to plan what they are going to say in their own defence - for it is at that very point that God will provide the words and God’s wisdom will be within them which he says no opponent will be able to contradict. The very point of loss will be the point of gaining one’s soul.

This message of hope, yet hope which fully acknowledges the reality of all that threatens, is not an escape from struggle. In today’s reading the juxtaposition of struggle, fear and foreboding side by side with God’s opportunity continues. There is distress among the nations, distress on a cosmic level - signs in the sun, the moon, the stars and on the earth, “distress among nations confused by the roaring of seas and waves (within our present context what a powerful imagery for ecological disaster and climate chaos). Jesus continues saying that people will faint from fear and foreboding of what is to come upon the world - for the powers of heavens will be shaken, our very faith in the goodness of God is shaken - and yet it is then that we will see the Son of Man coming, in the cloud, in the confusion, in the storm, he comes and he comes in glory. And Jesus says when you see these things beginning to take place “stand up, raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near”.

We have this sense of humble courage - we are called not to be covered by events, nor drowned by them - Jesus calls us to stand up, look up - there is hope and a simple human dignity even in the midst of what would seem overwhelming: within the disaster, if we have our eyes open, are the very signs of our redemption. What is it that we are seeing foretold here as we begin this season of Advent? Christ’s coming is a promise reaching out to the ends of the earth. It is also a call even in struggle, confusion and betrayal to be awake and alert to the signs of God.

Yet we are wary of trusting, cynical of putting our trust in anything beyond human power or control. We are often so bent over looking down at where our feet may slip or fall that we are unable to look up and trust in the presence of God. Our faith has lost its confidence and we as Christians can lose that simple dignity and beauty of looking up and recognizing the grace of the One who has come to set us free. Peter Matthiessen, who is a Buddhist writer, in his book *The Snow Leopard* describes a scene which often comes back to me. He and a group of Sherpa are walking along a narrow ledge in the Himalayas in search of the snow leopard. There is a cliff face rising on one side and a 1000 foot sheer drop on the other. He says that the path is wide enough to walk along and that if it were not for sheer drop he would walk along it easily. He describes the Sherpa walking with their heads held up, poised and balanced despite the heavy back-packs they are carrying. They seem to glide along the path without waver or wobble. In contrast he describes himself - bent over his feet, fearing each footstep, clinging to the weeds sprouting from the cliff face which come away in his hands - he writes: “it is our clinging which is our death.” Jesus says in today’s Gospel: “Stand up! Raise your heads- because your salvation is near.”

In his *Spiritual Exercises* St Ignatius calls upon those seeking Christ to stay constant even in times of darkness and desolation and to be alert to the signs of consolation and hope. He calls upon the seeker to follow blessing not curse. He warns against making decisions of discernment in times of desolation and being led by the destructive spirit, the spirit of despair. He calls the disciple in times of consolation to store up the memories of God’s love and grace and in desolation to remain faithful to those memories and grace will come.

I have just spent four days with the Sant' Egidio Community in Rome. It was during the Archbishop of Canterbury's visit which seemed to fuel in the media a great deal of speculation about the divisions between our Churches and the more those divisions were talked about in the hope of lessening them, the more they seemed to increase, like opening up old wounds. When I arrived in Rome the Sant' Egidio Community suggested I didn't attend the official programmes, which I could read up on later but instead joined the prayers of their community and visited the Rumanian gypsy encampment, the peace school where they were working with disadvantaged children of migrants, spoke with the homeless from North Africa and spent time with the homeless and illegal immigrants encamped around Rome Railway Station. On 22 of November the Archbishop of Canterbury joined us for a service of thanksgiving for the lives of seven modern Anglican Martyrs from the Melanesian Brotherhood. All these events did not avoid the pain or struggle of our lives and yet surprisingly still were able to discover grace in their very midst. Monica Attias, who had been planning the event to celebrate the Anglican Martyrs for many months, said that they had wanted to celebrate the sacrificial call of love which unites all Christians in the life, death and resurrection of Christ: to celebrate our unity in the Gospel rather than focus on our divisions.

This is the message of Advent: look for the blessing, look for the love which unites, look for the hope, for the seed of forgiveness, seek the light rather than the darkness which shines even brighter in the darkest night. As we enter this Advent season each week we light a candle. It is a vulnerable flickering flame, so easily blown out and yet a light which no darkness can withstand. It is a sign of Christ and a longing for him. It is news - GOOD NEWS - to the ends of the earth.