

Sunday 13 December: Third Sunday of Advent

Love bade me welcome but my soul drew back guilty of dust and sin

Readings: Philippians 4.4-7; Luke 3.7-18

In many ways John the Baptist is very much a character of his time, a wild prophet crying out in the wilderness “Prepare the way of the Lord” dressed in camel hair and living on locusts and wild honey. Yet listen again: his criticism and his warning of judgement are remarkably relevant for our political and financial leaders of today:

“Collect no more money than the amount prescribed to you. Do not exhort money from anyone by threats or false accusations and be satisfied with your wages.” John is calling the authorities of his time to get their house in order. Time is running out and immediate change is demanded “Even now the axe is lying at the root of the tree and every tree that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” We too are living in apocalyptic times and if you live on the edge of Trafalgar Square or have your church here it is hard not to be aware of it.

A month ago we woke to find ten massive tree roots in Trafalgar Square. As you walked over first you were hit with the sharp scent of dirt and bark – and then the incredible sight of these 10 mammoth tree stumps from the rain forests of Ghana rising up. Each giant tree stump laid down on its side, like corpses, their tangled buttress roots dramatically exposed and rising into the sky. These trees were as tall as Nelson’s Column when they were alive. Now they lie like beached whales, incongruous and dead. Beautiful objects, centuries in growth and creation, now a scene of devastation. The project to bring them first to Trafalgar Square and then to Copenhagen is called “Ghost Forest”. Ghana is just one of the places where the axe and chainsaw has already fallen with 90% of the rainforest lost in the last fifty years.

Then, on 3rd December, a small group of students and members of a medical foundation marked the 20th anniversary of the world's worst industrial disaster, at the Union Carbide chemical plant in Bhopal, India. Twenty years later, the legacy of tragedy and the injustice continues. The Indian government say 15,000 people died as a direct result of the leaking gas; since then the figure has risen to over 25,000 from resulting cancer and illnesses relating to the poison. I was invited to lead prayers in Trafalgar Square. People walk past non-plussed. Dow Chemical who took over from Union Carbide still refuses to take responsibility or to clear up the toxic chemicals left behind. The students sing as the rain pours down. Some wrap themselves in white sheets like shrouds, as a sign of those who continue to die.

Last week a small armada of tents appeared in Trafalgar Square around our crib. Our crib a multi-cultural collection of characters: Mary, Joseph, shepherds, kings, a donkey and sheep, homeless and seeking shelter behind glass in a London stable, surrounded by cold bedraggled climate protesters, selling samosas and organic carrot cake while the world rushes by on Christmas shopping expeditions, many seemingly oblivious to their prophetic message.

This week we have a melting polar bear made from a huge piece of ice slowly running away. It’s beautiful, translucent, huge but fragile, melting as though awash with tears; underneath it a bronze skeleton slowly appearing. “How long do you expect the ice of the polar bear to last”, I ask the artist Mark Coreth, who has created it. “We have no idea”, he replies, “it was meant to last fourteen days but the more people touch it the quicker it melts. When the skeleton appears that too warms and it will melt from the inside out – it is like the polar ice itself.” Next to the melting bear a message from the World Wildlife Fund tells us that all the

summer sea ice could have melted by 2030 with untold consequences for our planet. Go and see it after the service before it's lost along with the polar ice caps and the polar bears themselves.

Last week a film young film director Michael Goring made a short documentary recording the responses of passers-by to the Hard Rain Exhibition on the railings of our church and has posted it on Youtube. It's worth watching.

[\[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3SHGpf2ktA\]](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3SHGpf2ktA) What emerges is some present day prophets and the deep feeling these global issues elicit. One wonderful old lady tells of the way she has been on demos for justice all her life but she admits "to tell you the truth I'm tired." She describes how she went on the demonstration against the Iraq war; she says: "there were millions of people but we didn't get any reaction or any effect, the war continued, it was heart breaking. I was so hopeful. ... Being old with so much experience, I am still hopeful," she says longingly.

Beneath the beautiful Norwegian Christmas tree each night in the square groups are singing carols with the tunes people seem to love. These carols pack them into St. Martin-in-the-Fields too. But are they listening to the words? Is this a nostalgia for the past or a real longing for Christ coming among us – for change and for peace? 'Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled' – they sing. If only.

This is the juxtaposition: God and sin un-reconciled. Like John the Baptist all of us are confronted by the reality of continuing human destructiveness. We can't conveniently forget about it and hide it away. Sin matters. It might not be a word many are comfortable about using these days, nor should it be, sin ruins and destroys human lives. The media love to show how sexual infidelity can ruin lives. Yesterday this church was filled by families and friends of those who have died through violence and homicide. Not only the life of the victim has been taken but also the lives of those who grieved for them, forever wounded by the loss. Sin is not just individual, it is most often corporate even national, and we all get sucked in. Unfolding in the media in the Iraq inquiry is the story of the half truths and concealment which led our nation into the Iraq war, in which thousands have been killed. The way the western world acts now will and does affect millions of people in the poorer nations of the world. The power of humanity to destroy is all around. And so too is the beauty of our creation and of our common humanity; daily in this Trafalgar Square and in this church we are reminded of it – the power for creative resilience, inspiration, compassion and inventiveness to bring change. If peace on earth and good will to all people is to come it won't come like another attraction in the winter wonderland fairground, it will be hard won, born in the real world. It will need us to engage with that world. Like the birth of the Christ child it will be a struggle of flesh and blood for survival. In the words of Rowan Williams' Advent poem:

He will come, will come
will come like crying in the night,
like blood, like breaking,
as the earth writhes to toss him free.
He will come like child.

The crowds asked John the Baptist in the face of the coming judgement "what should we do?" John's answer is simple and so seemingly small scale as to appear inconsequential. He answers "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise. Collect no more than what is prescribed for you." This is simple wisdom, the wisdom that perhaps our parents taught us as children: that our future depends on

the way we treat others; that the rights to life of a villager in Tavalu living by the side of the sea is connected with our lives and the choices we make here in Trafalgar Square and the choices we make for our planet at Copenhagen; that the amount we pay in bonuses and expenses and salaries is not just determined by market forces and competitors but by concern for others and the human morality which says it is destructive and morally indefensible to pay such salaries while within five minutes walk of Trafalgar Square there are forty people sleeping in the street, many of whom simply can't even get a roof over their head in the winter and some of whom are sleeping in the streets because they have lost their jobs or got into debt or failed on rent and mortgage repayments in the economic crisis. The generous response to our Christmas appeal shows how many share that morality and sense of interconnectedness with fellow humanity.

At the end of his prophetic words of accusation, John the Baptist points to the Messiah, the one who is to come and says that he will baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire. He talks of this Messiah with a winnowing fork in his hand, dividing the wheat from the chaff, storing the wheat in his barn and burning the chaff in unquenchable fire. There is no way to soften this image. We are offered a stark choice between life and death, between blessing and destruction. In choosing the Messiah, we choose the vulnerable and the defenceless child and an incarnational love which we believe can change the world. As one of the members of our PCC said at a recent meeting "if we read Mary's Magnificat and sign up to that, isn't the struggle for the poor of our world something we have already signed up to too?"

Outside in the square tonight there are thousands of people dressed up as Father Christmas shouting: "What do we want? Christmas. When do we want it? NOW!" In front of the Christmas tree a choir is singing:

"He came down to earth from heaven
who is God and Lord of all
and his shelter was a stable and his cradle was a stall
with the poor and mean and lowly lived on earth our saviour holy."

What do we want? Christmas. When do we want it? NOW!