



Advent Sunday
Sunday 27 November 2011

Heaven in Ordinary

A sermon by Revd Katherine Hedderly

Readings: Isaiah 64. 1-9; Mark 13. 24-end

Over this last week we have had a walking prayer labyrinth chalked in the Courtyard here at St Martin's behind the East window. Based on the circular design of the labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral in France, it was part of 'Just This Day', a day focused on the importance of stillness and silence in our lives, and it provided a way to connect to stillness and quiet in the middle of this busy city.

During the week over 500 people walked the labyrinth, following the path that wound around, circling back on itself, journeying in and out, finding themselves at times close to the middle and then sent to the outer edge, finally arriving at the centre. A time to stop, reflect and then make the journey out. And all sorts of people of all ages walked it - children from six schools, those who work nearby, the spirituality group at The Connection at St Martin's, working with those who are homeless, members of the congregation, visitors to London and casual passersby. For us this week it was a thin place, a way to connect to God at its centre and hear at the heart of this city and within us his still small voice. Just one way to engage with the experience of 'Heaven in Ordinary', which is our theme for Advent this year, as we seek to journey over the next few weeks, waiting and expectant to signs of his coming and presence in our ordinary lives.

How do we equate that still centre and meeting point with God, that many experienced in walking the labyrinth this week, with the power and tumultuous images of God coming to meet his people that we hear of in our readings today? We are challenged on this Advent Sunday in those readings from the prophesy of Isaiah and Mark's Gospel by quite what God's coming among us means. Far from stillness and quite they overwhelm us with images that disturb and frighten and unsettle. They are full of confusion, judgement and foreboding. Is this the God we really want to meet? What of these images of creation in upheaval, the signs in the sun and moon, stars falling, the powers of heaven shaken? The Son of Man who comes in clouds with great power and glory? Nations caused to tremble. This 'heaven come into the ordinary' is deeply challenging.

But there are echoes there of the experiences of life around us that are currently challenging and disturbing us. An economic crisis that has destabilised the Eurozone and affected all of our lives; seeds of truth in the worldwide 'Occupy' protest movement, that challenge the City, and prod the church to find new ways to dialogue; countries of the Arab world, going through upheaval and change, as they grapple with how to create a future that brings stability and a more open society and government. The challenging experiences of our own lives. If we are seeking to find 'Heaven in Ordinary' it must be able to be found in these tumultuous situations too, as well as at the heart of this city, in prayerful attentive walking.

The theologian Paula Gooder, has just written a book called “Heaven”¹. In it she invites us to re-examine our concept and theology of heaven. She argues that we have ‘privatised and postponed the idea of heaven’ and it has dulled and distanced us from being alive to God who comes to us in ordinary life. Ask the average person in Trafalgar Square about where heaven is and they will point vaguely ‘up there’ to the sky but when pushed would most likely say that of course they know it’s not actually there, and might well go on to describe heaven as somewhere they would hope to go to when they die. And in our popular understanding it is conceived as a ‘spiritual’ rather than a physical place, a place of endless bliss and contentment. It has become she says more about ‘me when I die’, than about ‘God engaging with the world now’.... ‘We have made heaven into a private spiritual world, not a physical and immediate reality for the world now’. And our conversations about heaven only seem to occur around death, rather than in the everyday reality of our lives.

Compare this she says, with what is actually in the biblical narratives, where they were dealing with a very different understanding of cosmology than we have now. Heaven like earth was a place that was created and physically close. ‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth...’ the flat earth was envisaged in spatial relation with the heavens or the firmament above, and there was a real awareness of the thinness of that divide. Like we see in the wonderful passage from Genesis where Jacob, waking from his dream of the angels journeying up and down a ladder that reaches from earth to heaven, exclaims; ‘how awesome is this place, this is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven’², or of Moses taking off his shoes to ‘stand on holy ground’ and meet and speak with God³, or heaven that we hear Jesus speak of in Mark in the passage today, that with earth will pass away? We have lost our awareness of the closeness of God’s reality, just when we need it most. Our world and the biblical world don’t match any more. How do we find a new way to describe this relationship with our contemporary knowledge of cosmology, that re-awakens that awareness of the closeness and immediacy of God, who longs for us to become more aware of heaven; the thin place where God dwells now and will influence the whole world and how we live in it.

This is the kind of wake up call we need in Advent. We shouldn’t wait until the end of our lives for that hope of heaven. In our Advent waiting, we are alive to God’s coming and transformation now. Like that urgent call of Isaiah ‘O, that you would tear down the heavens and come down...’ that need for God in our world, our hunger to be in relationship with him and our world’s need of his transforming rule of real justice, righteousness, peace, compassion and love.

In Advent, we turn to that awareness that the ‘thin place’ where heaven resides is a person who comes to live side by side with us. In these days and weeks we watch and wait, expectant and hopeful, preparing ourselves for God in Christ who is heaven in ordinary.

Walking the labyrinth this week I was very aware that there’s no short cut to that place. We have to go the journey to the thin place – to the meeting point of heaven to find the person of Christ. Take the twists and turns, wind back on ourselves, turn from the

¹ “Heaven”, Paula Gooder, SPCK, 2011

² Genesis 28.17

³ Exodus 3.5

centre and find ourselves on the edge. It is in the travelling that we experience what it is like to journey to God at our centre.

Advent is that kind of journey, where we engage with the real twists and turns, experience what it is like to feel how far away from God we have become, ask the questions about how we can be drawn closer, what it means to listen out for his still small voice in our tumultuous world. Seek where God is in this, because that is where heaven is to be found. Watchful, alert, expectant to 'know that he is near'. It is a time to ask the questions of ourselves, our institutions, our society, our world. Sometimes this doesn't feel peaceful and still but is challenging and disturbing.

The new report on ethics in the City by the St Paul's Institute⁴ for example, asked some uncomfortable questions of our financial institutions. It showed how those working in that area live with contradictory ethics - whilst agreeing that the gap between rich and poor is too large and that the majority in their sector were overpaid, most supported the deregulation that had led to what they thought was a less just and ethical system, and to greater affluence for those that worked in it. Uncomfortable findings and just the place to start a conversation about where heaven is to be found. That kind of conversation might make us turn towards the centre, become more aware of the presence of God in the difficulties we face; seeking heaven in the City, heaven in the classroom, heaven in the Church, heaven in our institutions and structures and society. Heaven in ordinary.

Saphron who is homeless and in the Connection's spirituality group talked about finding 'a stillness in the middle' when she walked the labyrinth. 'A place where you can see things in perspective.' But said, 'you can't just stay there - you have to leave that still place.' Mada said "The centre does not add up to anything more important for me because the journey is now."

The journey of Advent is now. It is a journey of questioning and discovery, of truth and wonder, of waking up to an awareness of the nearness of heaven. Of the stillness and peace that is to be found everywhere, a thin place, an encounter with Christ, who comes with his transforming justice and love, righteousness and peace, to the heart of our world and that we long to discover most in ordinary places.

Christ that we long to discover at our centre. Heaven in ordinary. Heaven in us.

⁴ <http://www.stpauls.co.uk/News-Press/Latest-News/St-Pauls-Institute-report>