

Sunday 29 November: Advent Sunday

Advent Carols 2009 – “Love Bade Me Welcome”

The central image of Advent Carols is of light in darkness. Christ the light of the world coming among us. As John says in the great prologue of his Gospel, “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1.5). The light is not always welcome. Now we can see what’s going on, there are things which were previously hidden. In light we can be confident of the countless acts of kindness and goodness that have been hidden but there are other things of which we will be embarrassed and ashamed. The judgement brought by light in darkness creates a crisis for us which, in the Greek of the New Testament, is also an opportunity.

The Hard Rain exhibition along the church railings with its photographs of climate change functions in this kind of way. It is a shocking record of human exploitation and destruction of the planet, the record of our judgement; *and* the pictures also nurture our resolve and strengthen our determination to live differently and find a better way. The photographs are a judgement *and* an opportunity.

Sleepers wake, be alert to what is going on within and around you;
repent, turn round, face God;
be prepared to live in the here and now with the urgency and insight of people who stand under judgement.
These great Advent themes could be terrifying.

In relation to climate change there is deep anxiety about whether it’s already too late to make a difference. The photographer who created the Hard Rain exhibition, Mark Edwards, talked here a few weeks ago about the danger of our being paralysed by fear. He said we need a ‘tactical optimism’. That phrase has stayed with me and made me think about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Pastor killed by the Nazis in Flossenburg concentration camp, just before the end of the Second World War. Bonhoeffer recognised the difficulties of Christian belief in the Twentieth Century and wrote about the importance of our living *as if* we had faith.

It is extraordinary to realise now her letters have been published, that this is how Mother Teresa of Calcutta lived, *as if* she had faith. Her awareness of the absence of God took her into a deep and dark depression, out of which her missionary acts of charity radiated God’s love to the wider world.

That sort of faith is much more than a ‘tactical optimism’, because it is based on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He comes among us, ‘God in ordinary’. The light that he brings is not of harsh and unforgiving judgement but of mercy and love. Jesus’s earthly life is completed by his ascension into heaven and God’s kingdom. We in our day pray God’s kingdom will ‘come on earth as it is in heaven’. So our Advent hope is well founded. As we pray it, so we try to live it.

Each year a group of people at St Martin’s prepare a booklet of Advent meditations for daily use through to Christmas. This year they are organised around the poem by George Herbert, ‘Love bade me welcome’ which is our Advent theme. It’s a poem more usually associated with Lent but here in Advent its emphasis seems to fall differently.

Love.

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lacked anything.

The answer is external to me,
 ‘A guest’, I answer’d, ‘worthy to be here’.
And the shocking response,
 ‘Love said, ‘You shall be he.’

God who made us, remakes us in loving humility and patient service.

George Herbert was born in 1593, the son of a noble father and saintly mother. He was expected to attain high office and he aspired to fulfill that expectation, but when James I died in 1625 he lost his King’s patronage. After a month of prayer and fasting he accepted the vocation to be ordained priest.

Herbert’s friends were appalled at the thought of him as a parish priest, objecting that this was beneath his dignity and would not make use of his gifts and ability. They thought he should do something really useful and important, like being a politician or a banker. To them, he replied:

It hath been formerly judged that the domestic servants of the King of Heaven should be of the noblest families on earth. And though the iniquity of the late times have made clergymen meanly valued, and the sacred name of priest contemptible – (he really could be writing in the present day); yet I will labour to make it honourable, by consecrating all my learning, and all my poor abilities to advance the glory of that God that gave them...And I will labour to be like my Saviour, by making humility lovely in the eyes of all men, and by following the merciful and meek example of my dear Jesus.

Humility is a virtue and being God’s servant was the highest of callings.

*Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see...*

*A servant with this clause
Makes drudgerie divine:
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
Makes that and th’ action fine.*

In 1630 Herbert was given the living of Bemerton, just outside Salisbury, where he served as Rector for just three years.

George Herbert was wonderfully realistic about who we are. He knows himself, and us, and still manages to set the highest standards. At Bemerton, he wrote a pastoral manual called ‘The Country Parson’:

I have resolved to set down the Form and Character of a true Pastour, that I may have a Mark to aim at: which also I will set as high as I can, since hee shoots higher that threatens the Moon, then hee that aims at a Tree...[I]t is a good strife to go as farre as wee can in pleasing of him, who hath done so much for us.

For “Holy Mr Herbert”, prayer was at the heart of his vocation and images burst out as he expresses his excitement at the Christian vocation to pray.

*Prayer the Churches banquet, Angels age,
Gods breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage...*

*A kinde of tune, which all things heare and fear;
Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse,*

*Exalted Manna, gladnesse of the best,
Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest...*

The land of spices; something understood.

Prayer (I)

According to Kenneth Mason, in his journey to sanctity,
*Herbert discovered the meaning of faith as most of us discover it, through sin and repentance,
suffering and patience, the agony of decision and the serenity of hope. And in his journey to
sanctity, Herbert's gift of poetic inspiration took up and transformed his common Christian
experience, making it articulate in his verse.*

George Herbert Priest and Poet, Oxford:
The Sisters of the Love of God, 1980, page 1

As we begin the journey of Advent to Christmas, the mistake would be to think that either we are not worth it for God to bother with us, or that there is no conflict in God's call. The series of readings in this service make it clear that God's call is disturbing *as well as* life giving. Adam and Eve hid when they heard the Lord. Moses knew he wasn't up to the task he was being given...The young girl Mary asked, "How can this be?"

Here in the illuminated dark of Advent Sunday, Christ meets and invites us to the feast. He makes it possible for us, even me, to respond to the glorious vocation to live as if made in the image of God. He will come. He will come.

Choir Advent Calendar - Philip Ledger's setting of a poem by Rowan Williams

He will come like last leaf's fall.
One night when the November wind
has flayed the trees to bone, and earth
wakes choking on the mould,
the soft shroud's folding.

He will come like frost.
One morning when the shrinking earth
opens on mist, to find itself
arrested in the net
of alien, sword-set beauty.

He will come like dark.
One evening when the bursting red
December sun draws up the sheet
and penny-masks its eye to yield
the star-snowed fields of sky.

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.