

Sunday 30 November 2008 : The First Sunday of Advent

Creating space

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

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence...

"But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory.

So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

Yesterday morning, as I stepped out of my front door, I could here the distant strains of 'Jingle bells' being sung by children's voices. Turning into church path, I discovered it was two small boys running happily along with their father, presumably on their way for a Christmas shopping trip. Coupled with the preponderance of Christmas trees springing up around us, and the endless scanning of the whole site diary going on in the offices here just to make sure we haven't missed anything that's coming up, and you get the sense that we can't hold back the tide any longer.

So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

Except that looking back at the week as a whole, the things that dominate are not the prospect of tinsel and fairy lights. Instead it's the continuing economic crisis, with high streets names we grew up with falling into receivership; it's peoples' jobs being lost and peoples' homes being repossessed; it's the images of terror and violence on the streets of Mumbai; or it's the personal tragedies of sickness and loss that leave us bewildered, sorrowful and powerless. "It doesn't make any sense" is a phrase I've heard voiced in more than one conversation in the past few days.

Taken at face value, the Scriptural images with which we begin Advent also make little sense to the 21st century mind. They are are profoundly disturbing ones - signs in the sun and the moon; stars falling from the sky; the powers of heaven shaken and the Son of Man coming on the clouds with power and glory. All that is as far removed from the secular preparations for Christmas that dominate our shopping streets as it's possible to get. But those images don't just conflict with the tinsel and fairy lights of the commercial Christmas. For most modern day Christians they bring us face to face with uncomfortable questions. How do we live with all this talk of judgement and the second coming? How can we relate to the call of the prophets that God might tear open the heavens and come down and cause the nations to tremble at God's presence?

It's tempting to dismiss or ignore these images, or to moderate that language into something more palatable to modern thinking. But to do so is to lose sight of the difficult but vital truths those images convey. Paula Gooder, in the Advent book that we are following this year "The Meaning is in the Waiting" comments that only by engaging with what she calls the "end-time" theology of readings such as those we've just heard can we begin to understand the big Biblical themes of salvation, resurrection and the Kingdom of God. The big cosmic feel of Advent invites into a world of time and place which is unfamiliar and uncomfortable but which ultimately speaks across the centuries to those common human experiences of

questioning and puzzlement in which faith is challenged and honed and brought to new realities and new understanding.

Enter the Biblical world from which the words of Isaiah the prophet sprang and the resonances for us are powerful and immediate. The long lament of which we heard part expressed a mixture of hope and frustration of the Jerusalem community in the middle of the 6th century BC. The hope sprang from the fact that politically, the rebuilding of the temple had become a possibility. The frustration sprang from an apparent lack of progress, and, worse, no apparent sign that God would crown the new possibilities with a spectacular intervention.

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence - to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

It's a profoundly appropriate passage for this season of Advent when we are called to live with frustration of hoping and waiting for a new world, a Kingdom that is beyond the capacity of the human race to achieve. It's a cry of the heart that reminds us of our human limitations, of the limitations of time and space which we inhabit yet in which we can recognise glimpses of that which is beyond time and space.

The passage from Mark's gospel is perhaps in some ways even more discomfiting. We hear the words of Jesus himself speaking of his coming in glory to gather all things to himself. Mark's gospel was written perhaps 40 or so years after Jesus' death, at a time when the expectation of many was still that his return in glory was imminent and so the need to keep awake for this moment was all too crucial. But a new reality was also emerging, that the call to follow Christ was about the now but not yet – the hope of Christ's return is a hope that must be lived in the here and now, in the bewilderment of violence and persecution; in those situations when it seems the heavens are shaken and the sky itself is about to fall in. Echoing Paula Gooder's insights about the importance of grappling with these cosmic themes and images of the end time, there are those who say the only way to really understand Mark's Gospel is to start with this chapter, chapter 13, and allow it's apocalyptic vision to inform our understanding of the good news of redemption in Christ that Mark longs to tell. Like Isaiah, it's the vision of the infinite and cosmic that Mark gives us in Jesus' words that teach us about the reality of living in the limitations of time and space, and within our human limitations of understanding and of what we can do.

We've called our theme for Advent this year, "Creating Space". It's a deliberately ambiguous phrase – about the creator God who is beyond time and space yet who is known in the limitations of human flesh in the child of Bethlehem and who challenges us to create space for God in our own lives. Creating space is a phrase that plays with the limitations of time and space and understanding that are behind the lament of the prophet Isaiah; that are behind the apocalyptic imagery of Mark's gospel; that are behind the sense of bewilderment and powerlessness that we express in our own lament "it doesn't make any sense".

A few days ago, we held a memorial service here at St Martin's for Stephen McEwan, the chief executive of the Anthony Nolan Trust, who was tragically killed in a road accident earlier this year at the age of 48. For a whole host of reasons, it was one of those services that touched me profoundly both in the preparation of it and in conducting the service. I've been pondering it since, thinking about what we tried to hold in that service, as in so many of that kind – the bewilderment and sorrow that the circumstances of Stephen's death brought; the celebration of and thankfulness of a life well-lived; the warmth of relationships of family and

friends; the satisfaction of professional achievements and lives touched and changed in unimaginable ways; a deep sense of loss that the limitation of death brings, and the hope that death is not the final limit of the space that God creates for us. It struck me that what we did there, what we do so often in our liturgies, is in some way to create a space where the limitations of our perceptions can be touched by the eternity and infinity of God; touched albeit momentarily and fleetingly but in a profoundly tangible way, that allows our painful lament that “it doesn’t make sense” to be transformed into prayer and taken into the infinitely spacious heart of God.

And it seems to me that in some ways, that is what this season of Advent also does. Its bold language of judgement and redemption, its potent images of earth shaking and the heavens being torn open create a space for our hopes and fears, our bewilderment and our sorrows, our desires and our longings. Advent is a space where our limitations touch the infinity of God, who was and is and is to come, and just for a moment we know that even in the darkest, most bewildering places, he is near, at the very gates.

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Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory.
So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.*