Advent Sunday 2021

The arrival of Advent no longer pre-announces the arrival of Christmas in the sense that our screens and our shops have been full to overflowing with Christmas commercialism for some weeks. That dichotomy can begin to wear the faithful Christian down a bit as we seek to hold on to the rhythm of the Christian year and keep in step with the gradual revelation of the story of Jesus Christ. Most of us want to keep Christmas in its place and savour its coming slowly. There’s little joy to be had on the 25th December if we have anticipated everything weeks before.

So today I am keen that we retreat a little from the hubbub of others’ preparing their Christmas festivities and reflect a little on the magnitude of the event we will, in due course, be celebrating. Advent is a time in which we prepare ourselves not so much for festive celebrations - though they have a role to play in all of our lives – but for the breaking in to this world of the divine: Emmanuel, God with us. This is a breath-taking event for a world desperately in need of hope.

It is the magnitude of the significance of the birth of Jesus that is reflected in our two readings today, the first from the prophet Jeremiah and the second from the gospel of Luke.

One sad characteristic of modern life – especially life in the public arena – is the frequency with which promises are broken and, frankly, our expectation that they will be broken. We no longer feel able to take someone at their word and instead feel the need to turn every relationship into a contractual one. We see this with pre-nuptial agreements and we see it in the use of job contracts for volunteers and in plenty of other scenarios too. The days when one could take someone at their word – that an undertaking to do something would be followed up with prompt and responsible action – appear to be over. One only has to consider the swift decline in respect for politicians to understand the gravity of the situation. As a society we are fast losing the capacity to trust.

Advent reminds us however, that the most important promise of all time was kept. For hundreds of years God promised to usher in a new era of justice and righteousness, and in the divine personage of Jesus God did precisely that. Moreover, this was despite the failings and sins of the people of Israel and Judah. Here is a story not simply of a promise kept, but a promise kept despite constant rejection; a promise fulfilled by unconditional love.

A loving promise kept – without qualification, hesitancy, words of correction, advice, expressions of sorrow or regret, conditions or any other mechanism by which there might be any hint of contractual obligation between God and his people. Moreover, here is a promise kept with the enthusiasm and energy of creation itself as the righteous branch springs up for the salvation of humankind.

In the church we grasp the magnitude of this promise with both hands; our understanding of what has been achieved by God for us still filters through into the way we relate to one another and work with one another. Not for our church communities this communal dissent into distrust…here we commit ourselves to one another, to our common life in Christ, in a way that nurtures trust and the keeping of promises. Here in our church life there remains the strongest resistance to those forces that seek to undermine truth and personal responsibility. Here we still remember that God kept his promise and this instils in us the desire to do likewise.

The magnitude of God’s act in sending his only Son to us and for us, is nothing compared with the impact of that act upon the world. Our gospel reading conveys this in vivid language. The coming of Christ upon the world in Jesus – both then, now and in the fullness of time – will profoundly affect every aspect of creation as reflected in that wonderful Advent hymn – Lo, he comes with clouds descending. The impact of Christ – just like the impact of any new born child – is all encompassing. It’s not an event one can keep quiet for long – as Moses’ mother discovered – rather, it is an event to shout from the rooftops with joy and with fear too, as Simeon reminded Mary that fateful day in the temple.

Grasping the significance of what we will shortly celebrate once again, can provide us afresh with the foundation for a strong, resilient, and unshakeable faith. Now is the time to shake off any cynicism that has crept into our faith during the year, to dust down our doubts – though they may remain lurking there in the corners of our minds – now is the time to put aside any little grumps or disagreements we may be nurturing with one another, and now is the time to adopt a position of utter humility in the face of God, and to try and open our hearts as fully as possible to the mystery at the very heart of life.

This cleansing of ourselves is one way to interpret the Advent refrain to ‘keep watch’, to remain ‘alert’ to the coming of Christ. If our minds are open, focused and attentive, then we suddenly see much more of Christ around us than we ever saw before. Indeed, so much so, that we might, in time, like the shepherds and the wise men, see Christ in the backstreet manger, amongst the animals, amidst the forgotten and marginalised of our communities, and desire to respond with lives and voices active in service and praise.

As we enter this Advent may God fill us with expectation to greet the Christ child afresh in our lives; and may he may give us the courage to follow where the child leads us in the months that lie ahead. Amen.