

Advent 4 - Video Sermon - 20 December 2020

Luke 1. 26-38

Over the years, the Sundays of Advent have each been given a different emphasis. A common pattern today focuses on the Patriarchs, on the Prophets, then John the Baptist and, on this last Sunday, the Blessed Virgin Mary. In our Gospel Reading the Angel Gabriel comes to Mary in Nazareth, challenges her not to be afraid but to be open to accepting God's loving purposes and her part in their fulfilment, concluding with those words of ultimate hope, 'For nothing will be impossible with God,' (Lk 1. 37). And Mary's yes is part of our eternal salvation story: 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord: let it be with me according to your word.' (Lk 1. 38). And only then, not one moment before, with time and eternity brought together in that yes did the angel depart from her. All is now ready for us to journey on to Bethlehem to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Saviour; but that is my next sermon!

Advent properly focuses our thoughts on ultimate things, encouraging us to be alert, not to delay, for the time to do this is here and now. It was not unusual to associate the season with the four Last Things - death, judgement, heaven, and hell. There was another tradition in the Medieval Church that saw the four weeks of Advent as signs of the four ways Christ comes to us: his coming 'in the flesh', 'into our hearts', his coming to us 'at death', and his coming again 'to judge us'. This might seem a rather antiquated emphasis but in this particular year, which has seen so much loss and bereavement, it may be a source of some comfort.

I mention this because so many people this year have died on their own, without the comfort of their loved ones nearby because of

the Coronavirus. Those who mourn have felt this as a second significant loss, even though nursing staff and care home staff have often kept watch and priests have administered the last rites sometimes even by telephone.

In bereavement people have often found great comfort in the passage from St John's Gospel, so often read at funerals, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled: trust in God, trust also in me.' (John 14.1) and more particularly in Chapter 14, verse 3, in which Jesus says, 'And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.' (John 14. 3). There is great comfort in Jesus's promise that he will come again and take us to himself. These words are often read as a reference to Christ's second coming in judgment but another way of reading them suggests they refer to Christ's presence with us now. As we head into this difficult Christmas - some of us experiencing the first Christmas without a loved one - some of us alone - there is something wise and timely in revisiting this gentler tradition of interpretation. For just as we are full of hope that Christ will be born in our hearts, so too we can take comfort from Christ's promise to take us to him when we die. Every death is solitary. No-one can undergo it for us. But none of us dies alone. We are held in the everlasting arms.

In a similar way, there is wisdom in remembering that our salvation is not a solitary, one-off event. The gift of Christ's salvation is a process, something that needs to be worked out in 'fear and trembling' over a lifetime - just as Christ's saving action begins at his Incarnation and continues through his Ministry, Passion, Death, and Resurrection. Some of us can point to a particular moment that is the beginning of our Christian journey. Christians who do not feel able to point to one event are not

lacking anything because of it. All Christians are able to say: 'I was saved. I am being saved. I shall be saved'.

I have begun Tweeting this week the beautiful 'Great O' Advent antiphons that are said before and after the Magnificat at Evening Prayer for seven days before Christmas Eve. If we read them 'from above' - from heaven's perspective, so to speak - these wonderful refrains draw our attention to different aspects of Christ, moving from the cosmic reach of the Wisdom of God to the kind and gentle intimacy of the child born in the stable, God with us, Emmanuel. But if we ask why we need Christ to come to us, reading them from a human perspective, we can see they tell the story of our salvation 'from below', too.

The first of the great antiphons is 'O Sapientia'—'O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High, reaching from one end to the other mightily, and sweetly ordering all things: Come and teach us the way of prudence'. Despite our advances in knowledge, even considering the wonders of science, we still need to be taught by God and moved out of our ignorance. We need to learn to see all in things in reference to God, to value everything in the way God values them, to behold the world in its own right and not to see it as something to exploit. If we were wise, rather than simply knowledgeable, we would order our lives very differently. 'Come and teach us the way of prudence!'

But what use is it if we are prudent but not redeemed? So the second antiphon calls out, 'O Adonai, and leader of the House of Israel, who appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush and gave him the law on Sinai: Come and redeem us with an outstretched arm'. We need Christ's redemption to set free our minds, with which we shall see God, and it is prudent and wise to

long for it. The mystery and joy of redemption, however, is that the initiative is always God's. His grace goes before us, preparing the way even before we know to call on him.

But what use would it be to us to be instructed and redeemed but still captive? So the third antiphon asks, 'O Root of Jesse, standing as a sign among the peoples; before you, kings will shut their mouths; to you the nations will make their prayer: Come and deliver us, and delay no longer'. It is a strange thing that in our spiritual lives we can find ourselves trapped again and again by a propensity to sin in the same way. We all have flaws of character that we find difficult to escape and from which we need to be delivered and freed.

But we need to be freed not only from the effects of our own sin but from the effects of society's sin? For what use is it if we are delivered from our individual propensities, if the propensities of society keep us chained and shackled? 'O Key of David and sceptre of the House of Israel; you open and no one can shut; you shut and no one can open: Come and lead the prisoners from the prison house, those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death'. We need to be free to walk into God's freedom *together* - instructed, redeemed, delivered, and led out together from the prison house. Those who have been in the dark of a prison need a long time to adjust to the light. For who can see which way to go, or what to do, when we are blinking our way forward? So we ask to be enlightened, that we might adjust ourselves to God's light: 'O Morning Star, splendour of light eternal and sun of righteousness: Come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death'. For what use are all these - instructed, redeemed, delivered, and led out together from the prison house - if we do not see the way we ought to go?

Lastly, we pray to be saved - and our prayers are not for us alone. 'O King of the nations, and their desire, the cornerstone making both one: *Come and save the human race*, which you fashioned from clay'. And then, having expanded the scope of *us* to include to all God's people, all our brothers and sisters - and knowing that we do not pray alone - we pray for ourselves: 'O Emmanuel, our King and our lawgiver, the hope of the nations and their Saviour: Come and save *us*, O Lord our God'.

My friends, I encourage you to walk the rest of Advent with these wonderful expressions of faith and to grasp a little of the salvation we work out in fear and trembling through life. For Christ comes to us 'in the flesh' at Christmas. He comes 'into our hearts' daily as we confess him. He will come to us 'at death' - as he has come to those we have loved and lost - to those who have gone before us - and he will cover us with his mercy on the Day of Judgment. For our God, God with us, Emmanuel, is kind and merciful and gentle and loves everything he has made.