

Sermon – 3rd December 2017

Advent One: Mark 13:24-37

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Story of Bringing home Ikea Christmas tree...

Watching, waiting for the tree to unfreeze

Poor tree it was dry and brittle on the inside. And I know I've felt just like that tree many a Christmas.

We are in the first week of the season of Advent, a time in between now and the celebration of Christmas. To resist the temptation to rush towards Christmas, the decorations are out, the carols are piping through the aisle at the supermarket, there is the need to plan for Christmas, organise family. I know we have all been there, we get it. And it is precisely this compulsion to run headlong into Christmas, and not only the get caught up in the commercial Christmas but run into the celebratory joy of Christmas to resist the need to remain in Advent, to make space, to keep awake, to wait.

I saw a great little YouTube video explaining Advent in 2mins, if you google Advent in 2mins you will find it. The words that slide across the screen describe Advent as: expectant waiting, hopeful anticipation, joyful preparation. Expectant waiting...the story at the end of today's gospel passage we heard of the man going on a journey is full of the expressions of beware, keep alert, keep awake for you do not know when the master of the house will return. For what is it precisely we are waiting? (pause) What quality of waiting is specific for us, in our own lives now? (pause) Of course, you will say, we are waiting for the coming of Christ into the world! We are preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we are preparing for the second coming of Christ. And yet we also know that Christ *has* already come into the world 2000 years ago, and is vividly involved in our lives now, in our communities, Christ is here.

Christ is here, and Christ is coming. This is a mind bender. Time is no longer linear and chronological, Kronos or time; but the period of advent catches our breath, and compels us into God time into Kairos time.

And as the Gospel story describes, this is not an easy place to be. The gospel passage today is apocalyptic, time has been broken into. It speaks of great rupture in the cosmos, “that the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light” that the celestial bodies will fall from the firmament, even the heavens will be shaken. It is only then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.” The gospel passage is saying something about Advent. This is not a passive waiting, this is not moving towards the sentimental nativity scene of baby Jesus in the manger. But it is speaking of changed reference of time, but it isn’t easy imagery, in fact it is quite disturbing.

Let’s stay with this image of the apocalypse for a moment longer. The word itself comes from the Greek for ‘uncovering’ or ‘revealing’. Words that are full of possibility. And the way it is described in the gospel passage is not meant to be a literal event but an intensely real revelation, a description of the kind of earth shattering in-breaking it would take for our world to be set to rights. And yet is this what it takes to set our world to right? We know of another in-breaking with the coming of the Christ child into the world. In popular imagery and culture, the apocalypse is the end of the world, in usually devastating terms. But this is not what it means in biblical literature. It signifies a disruption in time, a time when the old world that we know would end and the new world would begin. *Even in Revelation, that great apocalyptic book, when justice is restored God gently wipes away the tears from their eyes.*

I found a lovely book called the vocabulary of faith by the American writer Kathleen Norris, in which she describes apocalypse as “a wake-up call, one that uses intensely poetic language and imagery to sharpen our awareness of God’s presence in and promise for the world”. This still does not stop the apocalyptic images from being disturbing, and confusing, or for some Christians to use it as an explanation for the current woes in our world as necessary birth pangs and take no action to remedy it.

But it does say something about the need sometimes to let scripture disturb and unsettle us, to cause us to question and wonder about what it means for us. Again Kathleen Norris quotes a fourth century monk about the task of reading scripture as “working the earth of the heart”, for it is only in a disturbed ploughed-up ground that the seeds we plant for grain can grow.

So let’s return to this first week of Advent, a time of hope, to be aware of the in-breaking of time, however we understand that to be, and also to nourish our spirits by soaking them in

hope, in peace, in joy – and by gently revealing hope for each other when it is hard, too painful to see. So that we are not like my Canadian Christmas tree, feeling dry and brittle.

Advent is also traditionally known as time of penitence but unlike Lent it not a time of repentance, rather a cleansing the inner spirit, a spring cleaning the home of the heart in preparation for an anticipated guest.

A 'greening' of the heart, or a 'greening of the spirit'. You may have come across this expression 'greening' - another one of my beloved teachers at college loves it and will take any opportunity to use it. It is an expression of Hildegard of Bingen, the 11th century German Abbess, a philosopher, composer and visionary; an advisor of clergy and kings, at a time where it was highly usual for a woman to be seen with such authority. It is taken from her concept of '*viriditas*' which is best translated as 'greening', evoking a life force, a healing, or a sap that sustains. My teacher at college says that for Hildegard it points to the endless creativity of God and names a defining quality of the Holy Spirit, which at the very heart of hope. It is the 'greening of the spirit', the 'greening of our lives' that has the quality of what we do in preparation for the wonder of Christ coming into the world at Advent. In those tender, hopeful shoots of the fig tree in the gospel story, in their creative life force responding to the light of Christ who is coming, and who is already here.