

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole
Advent Sunday
Sunday, November, 2020

Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37

A little suitably dark humor for Advent.

During World War II, four prisoners are captured and brought back to a German base, set to await the death penalty in their cells. The prisoners are a Scotsman, an Irishman, a Welshman and an American.

One morning, a German officer comes in and tells the prisoners, "You are to be lined up and each shot in turn, but before you are shot you get a final wish."

The Scotsman says, "Before I'm shot I'd like to hear Highland Cathedral played on the bagpipes once again, to remind me of the old country."

The German nods, "That can be arranged."

The Irishman says, "Before I die, I'd like to hear Danny Boy sung, in the style of Daniel O'Donnell, with Riverdancers skipping gaily to the tune to remind me of the old country."

The German nods, "That can also be arranged."

The Welshman says, "After them, before I die I'd like to hear Men of Harlech once again, sung by the Treorchy Male Voice Choir, to remind me of the old country."

The German nods, "Yes. That can be arranged."

Hearing all this, the American bursts out laughing.

When the German officer asks "And what is your wish?", he laughs even harder and says;

"Can I be shot first?"

Faces along the bar

Cling to their average day:

The lights must never go out,

The music must always play,

All the conventions conspire

To make this fort assume

The furniture of home;

Lest we should see where we are,

Lost in a haunted wood,

Children afraid of the night

Who have never been happy or good.

In this poem called "September 1st 1939", the day World War 2 was declared, W H Auden writes of the human tendency to cover up awfulness with sentimentality as a way of denying the darkness. The clinging to the average day, the music and the familiar faces at the bar while the world plunges into darkness of world war.

There is perhaps something of this in our societies desire to skip over Advent and move straight on to the twinkling lights and children's presents of Christmas Day. Fortunately, we Episcopalians, for all our theological faults, remain determined not to do this. Whatever is going on around us, like Christmas decorations going up in Georgetown before even Thanksgiving is celebrated, we try to maintain a hold on the darker themes of Advent because we know they represent a reality. A reality without which the joy of Christmas means little.

For Auden the War was the dark night to be feared. For us, well, this year has brought many things in which we have been confronted with an unavoidable darkness, hasn't it? We have lived with the stalking specter of sickness and death in the Pandemic and the fact that any of us could be struck down with it at any time. Also, this year we have seen unrest and violence on our streets and felt the intense hatred of our fellow citizens for each other. I heard a very good man I know say the other week that his friendship with a lifelong friend had been broken by the divisions of our day. 30 years of friendship gone. Many of us have felt similar sadnesses within our own families and among those we love. And these things are not to mention the terrible fires in the West and the vicious and destructive storms in the south. 2020 has been a bleak year in so many ways.

And so, we watch the manufactured sentimentality build around us and we are resigned to live a double life for these four weeks of Advent. We enjoy the frivolities and the lights and the anticipation of the feast as much as everyone else of course, but here, in Church, we take the opportunity to be grownups that are willing to listen to Gospels like those we have heard over the last weeks and the one today.

Jesus said, “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”.

The day of the Lord is an event of cosmic proportions but lest we waste time trying to know the date when it is coming Jesus also says that no one, not even he, knows when that is, and so, in a sweep of a sentence, he makes it a fruitless endeavor to try to forecast the actual day of the Lord purely from world events, however full of foreboding. Jesus ends this morning’s Gospel with the parable of the absent Master, and the servants who are left to keep the house and to watch carefully for his return.

That is the real message and it is two-fold; first, Jesus is being very clear that he will return.

“Then,” he says, “they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.” If Jesus is who we believe he is these words are true.

Secondly, Jesus is saying that the only way to live is to live every day as if he will return any moment. If we are awake and ready and keeping his house as he would wish, it doesn’t matter when he comes.

It has always struck me, when considering the end times, that regardless if the human race lasts another 10,000 or a million years, the end of time will come for me and for all of us, the day we die. That is when the second coming, in practice, happens for us.

I conducted a funeral for an ex-soldier once who had done the most terrible of things. I won’t say what it was as I know children will be watching this but it was a real horror, a parents’ worst nightmare, and just why he did it we can never really know. All we could do was to commend him to God’s mercy and hope that in the awful mess of his life and soul, there was something other than the terrible evil of what he had done.

These are the questions that the Season of Advent does not shy away from. The grown-up questions that the world so often wants to avoid, sometimes through sentimentality, sometimes through a blind, and equally comforting

determination to believe that we are pure and righteous while our adversaries are rank and wicked.

How could a man do what that man did? He must be mad or irredeemably evil. Like the Nazis at the concentration camps or, on a more mundane level, those who disagree with us about profound moral questions. They must be mad or irredeemably bad too. Deep down we know however, that there is something in us that can't quite avoid the possibility that, given a particular situation, we might be at least tempted to look the other way or even to collude in evil such as this.

The Men's group are currently studying a book call "Bystanders" by Victoria Barnett that examines just this reality around the Holocaust in Germany in World War 2. The real challenge of it is that it makes us realize how easily we might have become complicit depending on where we were and what pressure was put upon us.

The Day of the Lord's coming is a dark and serious day.

Fleming Rutledge, in her recent book "Advent" cites the story of how a woman told of praying for her husband's safety the night before he took off on Pan Am Flight 103, which exploded over Lockerbie in Scotland. After his death she said

her view of God had changed. “I don’t dislike him”, she said, I’m not mad at him. I am afraid of him.”

Where was God when this or that terrible injustice or loss happened? Where was God for us when our lives were broken and damaged by things beyond our control or by our own petty foolishness and mistakes?

These are some of the questions of Advent and we know we need to sit with them even if we have no neat answer to them.

As we have just heard in the beautiful Advent Prose, the second Coming of Christ is longed for but also feared.

We have sinned, and are as an unclean thing,
and we all do fade as a leaf:
our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away;
thou hast hid thy face from us:
and hast consumed us, because of our iniquities.

This is the tension of Advent and the second coming of Christ. We wait and we long for him, and yet we do so as souls who know our houses are far from being in order.

Advent is the time to take stock of our lives. Time to review our readiness for the Lord's coming and to take steps to be awake and prepared. Yet, we do so not as men and women with our hope. Our hope is not in ourselves. We could never be ready enough on our own. Our hope is in the one who is coming.

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, my salvation shall not tarry:

I have blotted out as a thick cloud thy transgressions:

fear not for I will save thee:

for I am the Lord thy god, the holy one of Israel, thy Redeemer

So, we sit with the brokenness and evil around us and the questions we cannot answer. We sit with our own sin and failure and our struggles to put our houses in order and to be awake and ready. Yet, still we cry out with the great refrain of that Advent Prose.

Drop down, ye heavens, from above, and let the skies pour forth righteousness: let the earth be fruitful, and bring forth a Saviour.

Where is God? He is here in the confusion and the pain. He is coming at the dawning of the new day for those who wait for him. Yes, we are

Lost in a haunted wood,

Children afraid of the night

Who have never been happy or good.

But we are his children and, when he comes, he comes to save us.