**Quiet Day for the Eve of Advent – 2nd December 2017**

**Three Themes for Advent: WAITING – FEARING – HOPING**

***WAITING***

Advent, which starts on Sunday, is the season of waiting. Not patient, British waiting, in orderly queues, politely; but urgent, impatient clock-watching, watch-tapping waiting. It’s not a comfortable time. Or not supposed to be, anyway.

It was much easier for our first Christian ancestors in that – in one respect, at least – they lived in an entirely different mindset to ours, one that it is more or less impossible for us to recover or re-enter. They believed that the world was finite and that they were living at the end of it. In Church we pay lip-service to this belief, especially, liturgically speaking at least, in Advent, but most of us do not literally “live each day as if [our] last” and do not literally expect the end of all things at any minute.

Which is just as well, because if we *did* live in that sort of frame we would never get anything done. If you are waiting for the taxi to take you to the airport for an urgent flight and there’s just half an hour to go you do not sit down and start a tricky and demanding task. Even if technically there is time to write that difficult letter or make that important phone call, the circumstances are not good. You are too distracted. Your mind – if not the rest of you – is elsewhere. You are already in imagination and spirit and concentration checking in, or arriving at your destination or whatever. To a considerable extent you have already left behind the cares and preoccupations of here and now.

This was exactly the frame of mind of the first generation of Christians. This is what Jesus had taught them to expect – that they belonged (and were to be transported) to another place, a new Kingdom, and that their proper concentration and loyalty and destiny were there. For most Christians in subsequent generations this has been less and less of a reality.

But for the weeks of Advent every year we are brought back to this period and mood of our formation. We become (or are supposed to become) first generation Christians again. The themes of Advent – in worship, in lectionaries and in the tradition – are the themes of the End-time, the few moments before the taxi arrives when all we can think about is getting away and what things will be like when we get to wherever we are going. That is why I have chosen the three mind-states that I have – *waiting, fearing* and *hoping* – to gather some thoughts and challenges for this eve-of-Advent Quiet Day, in an attempt to refocus our minds a bit on where (at least in the tradition of the Church) they are supposed to be just at this season of the year.

But often are not, of course. Because the irony is that so many of us are more likely at this time than almost any other to be completely distracted by the demands and preoccupations of the *here and now*, rather than the *there and then* which is supposed to be what is occupying all our thoughts and dreams. Here and now for our students are deadlines and assignments to think about and plan for at the end of the first term of the year. Here and now at this season in parishes are Carol Services to be planned and delivered and attended, School nativities, Christmas dinners at Residential Homes. Here and now (or coming up frighteningly soon) are rafts of Christmas liturgy to be put together, choirs and organists to be pacified, cleaners and decorators to be negotiated with … &c. &c. &c. And these are just the clergy anxieties. In the so-called ‘real’ world there is shopping and wrapping and cards and all that sort of stuff, as well. Catering to be planned, entertaining to be offered and experienced, family to be thought about and office parties, alternative office parties, and additional non-quite-office parties with slightly different groups of people to get ready for and go through, as well. In short, there is a very great deal of stuff to concentrate us on the *here and now* precisely in the season when the Christian tradition insists we should be thinking exclusively about the *there and then*.

This distracting and absorbing activity is resolutely to do with *this* world – not the next, not the place for which we are bound when the mythic taxi arrives to take us to the airport, the place we more properly belong when the insubstantiality that presses upon us so closely day by day is magicked away. Christmas so determinedly about tradition, what does not and cannot or should not change (at least in the opinion of those with the loudest voices, it sometimes seems!) and getting everything lined up so that the minutiae of tradition are strictly observed is, as we all know, a demanding business.

So, just precisely at the time that the older wisdom of our faith suggests stillness (i.e. waiting) and distance from the this-worldly and material (i.e. fasting) – the intended characteristics of Advent – we are constrained to rush about like the proverbial headless, thinking of anything but the eternal because someone has put the lights away in the wrong place and no one can remember where they are.

In these circumstances it is a truly remarkable and blessed thing to be able to take some time out from the rush and the pressure to ‘retreat’. I wonder how welcome this break in our routine is today – I hope you find it to be a blessing, at least to have permission, as it were, to be still. But I am still not sure that a lengthy disquisition on the joys and delights and propriety of passive waiting in peaceful contemplation as the way to be in these days of Advent will necessarily go down very well or be very helpful as preparation for the reality of pre-Christmas stress and busyness. I am unwilling (to put it bluntly) to push my luck!

So instead I want to suggest a different icon of waiting that I also think is central to the Advent reality, even if it is one that we reflect on rather less often. Not so much the One we wait for as the One who waits for us.

A young lad abandons home, half ruining the family – no respect for parents, brother, business: a spendthrift and a runaway. And immediately his father begins to *wait*. To wait for his son’s return. We can imagine him – can’t we? – anxiously scanning the horizon each morning, peering down the road that leads to the ‘far country’ where the boy disappeared. Longing. Longing and waiting for the boy’s return. And the father’s waiting – unlike so much waiting that *we* are familiar with – is far from frustrated or powerless: it’s attentive and expectant. As soon as there is a sign of movement – a lone and weary figure at the most distant bend in the road – the father is up and out, hurrying to meet his son, as the boy struggles back in shame and embarrassment, looking for love and welcome.

Much of our thinking about waiting in Advent focuses on the waiting *we* do: for Christmas and for the joy and celebration that that represents. We wait for that – and not always patiently! And we wait for the Return of Christ, our long lost brother from whom we are estranged, not (as in the parable) so much by his wandering, as by ours. The Babe of Bethlehem, the Crucified One, the Risen Lord now to come in glory at the end of time: we wait for that with eagerness and impatience.

This emphasis in Advent on *our* waiting and *our* longing makes it easy to forget that God’s waiting and God’s longing for us, for our restoration and our glory, comes first. Without God’s longing and passion we would have nothing to long for, nothing worth waiting for and so some reflection on the God who waits for us, attentively and longingly, may perhaps be a salutary corrective to the anxious and distracted preparing that characterises so much of this season, perhaps especially for us clergy.

I wonder if – seeing that expectant stillness is something that it is so difficult for *us* to find or generate for ourselves in this season (I speak for myself, you understand, but maybe also for you) – some reflection on the patient, watchful and expectant Father may not be an encouragement?

*‘Longing’* from ‘The Church’ section of ‘The Temple’ by George Herbert

***FEARING***

What, I wonder, would be your most shocking Gospel verse? There are quite a few to choose from. One of the contenders, I suggest, must be Matthew 24. 43-44*; “Understand this: if the owner of the household known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”*

The parallel Jesus draws between his coming and a burglary – with him as the burglar – is one of the most daring (or should that be outrageous?) in the whole of Scripture. If you have been burgled, or supported someone who has, you will know how traumatic, violating and agonising the experience is. The loss of precious things is distressing, but most would maintain that this is by no means the most disconcerting or frightening aspect of the experience. It’s the rummaging through what is private and personal, the thought of alien fingers and eyes forcing their way into places that are defended and sacred, that most upsets and alarms. The fear that nowhere and nothing is safe – that “they” may come again at any time – is what robs the victim of peace and causes distress out of all proportion to the value (either intrinsic or emotional) of the goods taken.

Yet this is the image that Jesus uses in that passage in Matthew to describe his return, the “Day” of the Lord, of Judgement, of fulfilment and of hope. It’s a very challenging proposition. Perhaps especially for Church folk – and perhaps even more especially at the season of Christmas with its emphasis on welcome, return and the familiar – the idea of break-in and disruption is particularly difficult to envisage as Good News. As difficult as that classic “good news” message on a sandwich board: “Prepare to meet thy Doom!”

This is why Advent traditionally has always had a hint of the minatory about it, something foreboding, even threatening. Three of the traditional Four Last Things in Christian teaching – Death, Judgement and Hell – are firmly rooted in and generative of this kind of uneasiness. (The fact that the fourth is Heaven somehow doesn’t quite seem to compensate or even out the balance, it has to be said.) We reference this tradition rather less these days than some of our forebears did but the idea that folk might be frightened (just as much as loved) into the Kingdom of Heaven is one with a long pedigree in Christianity – think of all those Doom paintings and the teaching associated with them. Think of the use made in popular preaching of the imagery of biblical books like Revelation and Daniel and passages about everlasting flames and weeping and gnashing of teeth in the Gospels. It may have less of a place in our contemporary preaching at this season (or any other time) – perhaps especially at times like these, when the terrorised world is so well furnished with causes and threats to be fearful about – but it is part of our inheritance, and our inherited wisdom. We need to take it seriously and think about what it may have to say to us.

To counter the idea that the Gospel can or should be presented as threat, we prefer to quote texts like 1 John 4. 18: *“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love”* and the notion that the freedom that the Gospel promises comprehends freedom from fear, as well as freedom from the sin and death that fear fears, is axiomatic to our understanding of the love of God and its expression through the Cross. But the Cross itself is a violent reality – a means of punishment and so an expression of judgement – and a proper aspect of our reflection on the incarnation, and our preparing to celebrate it as we do in Advent, is to reflect on the judgement it represents, and to do so (in the language of the Bible) “in fear and trembling”.

The very vulnerability of God incarnate in the Babe of Bethlehem, helpless, swaddled and dependant is a judgement on the world that that Babe comes to redeem. In the face of strength, competitiveness and coercion – and their shadow realities of violence, injustice and terror – Almighty God is revealed as weakness, mildness and humility and that is not merely paradoxical, it is a judgement on the world of human construction and shaping. You don’t need images of hellfire and the agonies of the damned to see that the world as we know it and have fashioned it is condemned and will pass away. Because true power is revealed in love and invitation and acceptance – the things of the Baby – rather than the currencies of force: whether intellect, finance, arms or the suicide belt.

What we know will pass: that is frightening, and it is right that it should be. What we have made and what we support will be found wanting in the face of incarnate love: it (and we) will be judged. Fear is entirely appropriate in these circumstances, and all without so much as a whiff of brimstone!

And we can and should anticipate this. That there is much in our world that, exposed by the “thief who comes in the night”, will not bear the exposure is plain and obvious. Where shall we look? To the barbarities of the conflict in we have seen so recently in Syria and elsewhere, and their spillage in this last year onto the streets of London and Manchester and New York and elsewhere? To the reckless melting of the ice caps or plundering of the planet’s resources without thought for consequence? The scandal of inequality … the juxtaposition of starvation and bloatedness, of inequities of health, of security, of dignity across the world? Outrageous behaviour by politicians, by bankers, by journalists, by priests … there’s plenty to condemn, plenty to show up as signs of corruption and compromise and decay. And not just in the public spheres, either: what of the private vanities and deceits, the carefully nurtured grudges and animosities, the secrets and unforgivenesses that are preserved in human hearts, and communities and colleges?

All this, we believe, is what is to be rummaged through – and exposed – at the coming of the Son of Man, the burglar who comes at a time and in a manner not looked for or welcomed. All this is cause for real fear – and cause, too, for naming, shaming, conflict and repentance now, as well. All this is very much the stuff of Advent and of our Advent discipline and Advent proclamation, too – for all that we are often rather queasy about facing up to this challenge. There is real imperative in Advent to the Church, and to us who are her ministers, to the prophetic ministry – and to the anterior personal and corporate repentance without which it cannot be exercised with integrity, of course.

But maybe the last word on fearing – the word to bring us to our knees in silent wonderment – is that which makes it synonymous not so much with terror, as with awe. In the still heart of that dark but candlelit, exhausted but delight-ful night to which we look forward exactly three weeks from tomorrow is something not to terrorise but to strike dumb with amazement and joy. That is the fear of God that Scripture enjoins and our tradition explores: wonderment, inspiration, consciousness of the holy. It is in this context that, like the shepherds and the wise men, we are invited to draw near and see this thing which has come to pass: Almighty God, helpless in a feeding trough for the rescue of God’s own world.

‘Fear him, ye saints, and you will then have nothing else to fear

Have nothing else to fear;

Make you his service your delight

Your wants shall be his care.’

Amen.

***HOPING***

It is a familiar truism that Christian hope is a very different quality and cast of mind from secular optimism. Optimism is – well – *optimistic*. It does not show signs of groundedness in reality or lived experience: indeed, it is counter-intuitive and counter-experiential. As a not very good friend said to an aunt of mine many years ago when she became engaged to be married for the third time, “Once again, optimism triumphs over experience!”

By contrast, Christian hope is rooted and relational – and therefore a more confident – reality. Christian hope is firmly and irreducibly grounded in the Resurrection – hope for the life immortal – and so in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. A key text must be Hebrews 6.19:

“*We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, forerunner on our behalf, has entered …”*

We hope *in* Jesus and *because of* Jesus, the ground of our hoping being his life, an objective reality proved by the resurrection, experienced in the Spirit and entered into through the mystery of baptism. On the basis of this relationship, our hope is “sure and certain”, dependable and secure. There is, in fact, very little difference in terms of inner, spiritual meaning and value between what the writer to the Hebrews means by “hope” (*elpis*) in this passage and what St Paul is signifying when he speaks about “faith” (*pistis*).

This has quite a bearing on a consideration of hope in the context of Advent and, indeed, *hoping* as a characteristically Advent activity. As A. T. Hanson put it, “The Christian hope is not hope in a divine transformation scene which alone enables us to tolerate life in this vale of tears. It is the inevitable consummation of the life lived in Christ on earth.” Christians are occasionally accused of a kind of other-worldly irresponsibility which absolves them of interest in the world they inhabit. It is the inevitable corollary of the kind of waiting-for-the-taxi mindset that we considered earlier. Things may be miserable or disordered in the present but there is a future that is just around the corner in which all will be miraculously put right and our proper calling is to live there, rather than here, merely enduring our present existence until that great day dawns.

Such an understanding of the nature of the Christian promise (and therefore of Christian hope) has to be deeply misleading and inadequate, of course, precisely because it undermines the passionate commitment to this-worldly righteousness and justice which we are called to exhibit and which we looked at briefly in the last address. The disorder of our world and current existence is something that sits under the judgement of God. Its supreme achievement is the cross, which is also – by God’s grace in Christ’s sacrifice – the proof of its insubstantiality. In that death is the promise of resurrection and it is that resurrection that judges and heals the disorder to which the world is enslaved. Hope rooted in that dynamic can only be hope committed to that very victory: victory over sin and death, injustice, destruction and futility. Christians – people motivated by this hope – will be people passionately committed to this vision.

Hope, therefore, is an active thing, involving commitment to the reality and vision hoped for. Just as Advent waiting is an expectant, responsive, involved waiting (rather than something passive and powerless), so Advent hoping needs to be full of energy and passion, rather than fatalistic or cynical.

We may feel that this is not easy in today’s Church with its dominant narrative of decline and loss of influence, numbers and confidence. Christmas may be one of those occasions in the year when traditional observance and ritual give us a shot in the arm – those marginally fuller services – but the possibility is that this merely emphasises the more general (and more generally depressing) trajectory of slump into insignificance. The Advent challenge to hope is particularly important to take seriously and respond to in these circumstances.

The witness of most of the New Testament – and certainly the teaching of Jesus, particularly for instance in the Sermon on the Mount – is of a vocation to the Church to witness sacrificially to the truth of death and resurrection and, by so doing, to make a difference – to transform – the society and communities in which she is set. To be salt and leaven and light, providing taste and lightness and colour for the world will involve being lost (sacrificially) in the greater context so that good for the whole may follow. For the seed to sprout and bring forth new life it must first die and be buried.

This calling – to sacrificial and sometimes imperceptible immersion in the world (not unlike the dynamic of incarnation itself) – is rather different from the anxious determination to build up numbers, to survive and achieve visible influence and clout in the world’s terms that often seems to drive the so-called “growth agenda”. It will be more altruistic and less anxious and – dare I say it? – more faithful than some of the prognostications we see so often for the Church from some quarters, and may merit some careful and hopeful Advent reflection in our time.

Both spiritually and liturgically – from Advent wreaths with their candles to Services of light to the famous Advent collect that speaks of casting away the works of darkness and putting on the armour of light – light, and looking for the light, is a key theme of Advent. Looking for light, finding it and seeing it gradually grow, is a good model for living in hope. Hope may seem sometimes small and vulnerable – as small and vulnerable as a baby in a manger – and the shadows cast by a small and flickering flame are long and often menacing. But hope attracts: it calls forth response as we are drawn to its source and changed in our own being, made a community gathered around the shared hope and promise that dances in the surrounding gloom. Advent hope is less a mindset to be generated, sometimes against the odds of our inclination or experience, and more an invitation to be met as we are drawn to the light and ourselves transformed by it – reflected light in the human face is a thing of real and transformative beauty – and thus become, ourselves light- and hope-bearers in a world that is often characterised by both darkness and despair. This is what converts our waiting from mere impatience and our fearing from powerless dread: hope that is full of promise, light in which all things will grow and flourish. Amen.

*‘Advent Calendar’* from ‘The Poems of Rowan Williams’ (OUP 2002)