

Sermon for Advent 1(C) – Sunday 29.11.15

St James' Church, Cambridge – The Revd Deborah Ford

Lectionary Texts (printed at the end of the text):

Jeremiah 33:1-14

Psalm 25

1 Thessalonians 3:9-end

Luke 21:25-36

“Now...may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” (1 Thessalonians 11-13)

- Advent is the season when we're invited to heighten our sense of the 'double time' in which we live: the 'already and not-yet' of God's kingdom – all that has begun, but is still longing for completion and fulfilment when Jesus comes again.
- So it's quite common to have 'apocalyptic' readings in Advent- readings about the 'end times'. Many of them are pretty extreme and dramatic - like the book of Revelation – or Luke's description of Jesus' return we've just heard in today's in gospel (“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken...”)
- But, however weird they might be, I think they have a purpose. As we engage with them, it's if God's word itself is stretching our capacity to take in more of the height, length, depth and breadth of God's love. And their main message is simply, as John Robinson puts it (in the title of his book about the 'last things'): “In the end, God.”

- Just as in the beginning God was, so in the end God *will* be. So it's not just about the end -the 'outcome' of it all (however much today's society values outcomes above almost anything else), it's about the light in which we live now, too.
- Last weekend, I was in France, staying in a L'Arche Community in a village about an hour away from Paris. You may have heard me mention L'Arche before ('L'Arche' being French for 'the Ark of the Covenant')—it's a network of communities throughout the world where people with and without learning disabilities live in faith together. The assistants tell of the amazing ways in which they have come home to themselves and God through being welcomed and loved by some of those who've been so rejected and harshly judged by Society: how they've learned to accept their own vulnerability and limitations (God's strength made perfect in weakness') and begun to discover the deep freedom and joy of the upside-down values of the gospel.
- As one of them said, "Initially I just went for the experience... but my life has started to change: I've found a new light..." And another, "I didn't want to come here: I only came to learn French – that was the only reason. But something's got through to me here. My parents divorced when I was quite young and I hadn't realised, but I'd built lots of defences around me. Now I can let down the walls I built around me. I've learned not to see fragility as negative, but even something positive; because we all need each other – to give and to *receive*. It's given me freedom to be *me*: unconditionally."
- Our visit was planned several months ago, and as you can imagine it was a poignant time to be there – our flight landed in Paris exactly a week after the recent attacks.

- But even more memorable was meeting several young assistants of other L'Arche communities: Siba and Fadi from Syria, and Josef, from Bethlehem. For them, the horror of terrorism and war has been not just one isolated event (not that that wasn't horrific): they live with it week after week; month after month; year after year – 24/7.
- Siba spoke of what it's like living in the L'Arche community in Damascus at the moment: “L'Arche is a place of warmth and beauty and peace: you can forget everything outside for a bit,” said Siba. “We don't go out much. We have to stay inside because of the bombs.” (she was soon overcome by tears...)
- Then she went on: “Maybe my tears are because I think we are innocent – especially the people with learning disabilities: they don't deserve this. We try to protect them, but we can't stop them *hearing* the bombs. Everything is changing –systems, programmes, and communities – all because of the war. But we try to carry on and to live in the way of L'Arche and hope and pray... Syria is a beautiful place... I'm longing for the world to see that.”
- Siba, Fadi and Josef must be amongst those in the world today who feel the tension and longing of the ‘already and not yet’ of God's kingdom as much as is possible: how *beautiful* their countries/homelands have been and should be and yet how terribly wrong it has all gone. It's like they're living in exile - right where they belong:

“How long, O Lord? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?” (words from Psalm 13: 1-2)
- The Jeremiah passage is written to encourage those in a similar situation – all the leaders and those perceived to be a threat by the powers-that-be, exiled from Jerusalem.

- But right into the depths of their darkness and despair, God speaks new words of hope and promise: “**I will fulfil the promise I made...I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up... and he will execute justice and righteousness...**” Jesus *himself* will come.
- And by the time of Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, he has. It’s one of the earliest letters, so not long after Jesus’ death and resurrection and they early Christian community are convinced that the end of the world is going to happen tomorrow: tonight, even. So they’ve gone wild – they’ve given up their jobs, stopped tending to their homes and gardens – they’ve let everything go, because what would be the point of keeping it all going?
- But Paul says, ‘Stop! Are you out of your minds?! God is not a magician! Just as Jesus seems to be saying to the disciples: don’t be surprised when terrible things happen. We *do* hurt and disappoint and let each other down... Sometimes intentionally and wilfully, but often because we are just *blind*.
- There *is* continuing darkness in the world, but the light has shone in the darkness and the darkness does *not and will not* overcome it. There is always new life -just as the fig tree bursting into leaf – right in the midst of destruction. That’s the *miracle* of God: that he’s there in the middle of it, transforming it and giving signs of hope and joy.
- We need to get the right balance of the ‘already’ and the ‘not-yet’. If we don’t have enough of the ‘not yet’ and all that *is* to come, we end up cynical and stoical... And if there’s not enough of God’s kingdom having already begun to be realised, we become detached from life in all its wonder *now* (like the Thessalonians).

- God *will* fulfil his promises – in *God's* good time. What we need to do is *trust* him and get on with what *matters*: and what *will* matter in God's future-building up those things that are and will always be treasures in *heaven*.
- “May you *abound* in love for one another...” says Paul: be perfected in love: that's what holiness is. *That's* what's going to give us strength to stand when we meet the face of pure love.
- It's what Josef (from L'Arche in Bethlehem) is doing: “The situation in Palestine has been going on for 60 years... It's *too long*. We need peace now, to be able to *live*. We're desperate for it: we're looking for it... We pray for it; we hope for it.
- But we also have important time to share our lives *now* and we give thanks *every* day.
- My best friend is Shukri, a core member (someone with learning disabilities), and he likes to go to church like me. Our church is the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. I always thank God for that church: it's the most important church in the world! Imagine being able to go there. Shukri and I go together to pray for one another; for our friends, our families, for peace... and to give thanks.”
- Paul's words could be written for him, couldn't they? And us here at St James: we have some much to the thankful for, don't we? God has given us so much!
- **“Now... may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so**

strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” (1 Thessalonians 11-13)

- It's not possible in our own strength... In the gospel reading, Jesus tells his disciples to 'pray at all times' but then goes straight out to pray *for* them. That's what his Spirit is doing all the time in us and in God's world.
- It's the opposite of deism, where God sets things in motion and then hands them over to the laws of nature.... or where Jesus is at the beginning and end of some timeline, Jesus is at the heart of it all *now*: *intimately involved* in his creation: prompting new life and possibility and bringing his potential to fulfilment every moment of every day. That's what 'Emmanuel' is about. It's the fulfilment of the promise in Jeremiah: **“And this is the name by which it shall be called: the Lord is our righteousness. (Jeremiah 33:16)**
- The deeper we go into Jesus – the more we abide in him and he in us – the more we *will* feel his longing for things to be the fullness of all they've been created to be... and the pain of all that distorts and resists and tries to threaten and undermine it. But the closer we get to Jesus' heart and love, we also feel his peace and strength and reassurance that 'all shall be well' in *him*.
- And his invitation to us is 'Come! Be *with* me where *I* am...' **“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” (Luke 21:33)**
- The young L'Arche assistant who'd said she hadn't wanted to go- that she'd only gone to learn French (she's about twenty), said: 'L'Arche is a place of such *happiness*. There is pain and suffering, of course, but we

celebrate *life. Every day.* I went to my cousin's wedding in Germany recently and even there/then, I didn't feel nearly as deep a joy as I've found in L'Arche.

- She's found where *Jesus* is. She said, "It's been the best experience of my life." And her face simply *shone*.
- So as we enter into Advent this year, let us give thanks for God's love in our midst; let us pray for the grace to notice and *be* with Jesus where he is and to be drawn deeper into his Word, as we pray (in the words of the Psalmist):

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

O my God, in you I trust....

**Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.**

**Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long. (Psalm 25)**

Amen.

Jeremiah 33:1-14 ‘The Righteous Branch and the Covenant with David’

14 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.¹⁵In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’

Psalms 25 ‘Prayer for Guidance and for Deliverance’

¹ To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

² O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.

³ Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

⁴ Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.

⁵ Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.

⁶ Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.

⁷ Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness’ sake, O Lord!

⁸ Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

⁹ He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.

1 Thessalonians 3: 9-end

⁹How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?¹⁰Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you.¹²And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.¹³And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Luke 21: 25-36

‘The Coming of the Son of Man’

²⁵ ‘There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.²⁷Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory.²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’

‘The Lesson of the Fig Tree’

²⁹ Then he told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees;³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

‘Exhortation to Watch’

³⁴ ‘Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly,³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the

whole earth.³⁶Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.’