

Holy Trinity & St Peter South Wimbledon Sermons

Advent Sunday

By Mark Budden

Advent Sunday, 29 November 2009

May I speak and may you listen in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Mother Teresa told a story about the time she came down with a terrible fever. Her temperature climbed and she became delirious. She had a vision of being at the gates of heaven and telling St. Peter that she was ready to pass from this world to the next. But St. Peter refused her entry into the high vault of heaven. Mother Teresa asked why. Peter replied: "Because there are no slums in heaven."

It's the First Sunday of Advent and we could easily trivialize this season, this beginning of a new church year. We could focus so on the Advent wreath and the other church symbols of the season and miss the vocation, the deep longing, of Advent. We might easily spiritualize this season and see it only as a time for retreats and inner preparation for the joyous tide of Christmas.

But waiting for the Christ Child is best spent working for the cause of justice and righteousness in the land. Peter turned Mother Teresa back from heaven's gate because there was work for her left on earth. Her vocation was in the slums of earth not in the glory of heaven.

So, it is with us. If Advent is anything, it is a season of painful waiting in the world and not detached from the world; a season of darkness before the light comes; a season about a future that is not yet--about a redemption that is "drawing near" in the language of Luke's Gospel. It is a time to be alert--a time of praying that we will have the "strength to escape" that which is "coming upon the world" that will cause us to "faint from fear and foreboding."

Advent is about the coming of the Child of Mary and it is about the end of history. There "will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves." Our vocation as Christian disciples is to make Advent more about earth than heaven. We must be like Peter at heaven's gate: We must remind ourselves that there is work to do as we wait for the Lord of History. The best way to wait is to work for the kingdom--for justice and righteousness in the land. That's what Mother Teresa did with her time on planet Earth.

In a recent editorial in a newspaper, the rock-star Bono asserted that America holds the keys to solving the three greatest threats we face on this planet: extreme poverty, extreme ideology and extreme climate change. All of us would hope to escape these "signs." They do cause us to "faint from fear and foreboding." If we are to be ready for the Lord, then we must name the darkness that is a shroud of death across the nations: that is extreme poverty. Advent could be the season to identify the causes of poverty. Should we champion the cause of poor women and girls whose issues are so often forgotten? Does not our care for these recall Mary, the bearer of God himself? How would the nations revolutionize health and agriculture for the world's poor? These are big questions and Advent is about them, for it is a season about the whole world.

As we light the candles of Advent, we must acknowledge that we have some of the light but not all of the light. Extreme ideology is a "roaring sea" that is causing distress

"among nations." Waiting for the Christ Child might best be time spent listening to those with whom we disagree and I recognise that this would be particularly difficult for me, to for example engage with other Anglicans who are opposed to the ordination of gay people or to fundamentalists who take the Bible literally. How can we be civil in our religious and political discourse--and tolerant, yet rooted in the deep truths of our own tradition of Anglicanism? Preparing God's house for the Christ Child might mean making the rooms larger – to accommodate the difference that is within our own faith tradition. Is not Advent a time for interfaith cooperation as we wait for one valued in Islam, Judaism and Christianity? This Child of Mary, the Christmas Joy we await is larger than our own world. Jesus is the world's child and we must live into such radical inclusion, such deep joy.

Bono's third threat, extreme climate change, is the big political issue. Poverty and extreme ideology are equally important. Truly, the writer of Luke's Gospel is right: "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars – and on earth distress." Advent is a time in our Church to read the signs as carefully as we read the Bible or light the candles of the Advent wreath. Time is running out – and that is the message of Advent and why the waiting is painful. Advent has within it always: "fear and foreboding." No one has waited for a child without some anxiety, some fear – and yes foreboding. God's Church waits each year for the Lord of all with fear and foreboding – for we know in our hearts that with the coming of the Christ Child we have work to do, threats to meet and dreams to make real. In Jesus of Crib and Cross, God comes to be with us and for us in the world where we taste and see.

The British born American poet Denise Levertov writes: "The world is not with us enough. O taste and see..." We must be *with the world enough* this Advent. We must travel lightly – with only our prayers, our pained hearts and our willing hands. We must be alert at all times, and especially for the poor, with those with whom we differ and with the earth that is suffering and weary. We must be praying daily to have the strength to stand now and in the last great day before the Son of Man, this Christ Child who will come and who is forever our Lord and Saviour, yes, this Jesus, Child of Mary and Lord of History.

Amen