

Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – 29th November 2020

Isaiah 64.1-9; Psalm 80.1-8; 1 Corinthians 1.3-9; Mark 13.24-end

There are two sides of the coin to the season of Advent, with God as good cop and God as bad cop. In the bad cop God scenario, God turning up is something to be dreaded and feared. He is bound not to like what he finds; he is bound to be highly critical; it is frankly not going to be easy, or pretty, for lots of people; quite messy really! In this view of Advent, it is a season of repentance and amendment of life, lest the boss turn up unexpectedly and find us out. In this scenario, Advent is a season of fear and trepidation.

Whereas, in the good cop scenario of Advent, God is much more like the cavalry riding to the rescue. This is the clouds of glory bit. He comes to bind up the wounds of the faithful, to heal a broken world, and to bring new hope and new life. In this scenario, the arrival of God is still unexpected, (that seems to be his way of doing things,) but it is something to be longed for, and deeply hoped for; and it is deeply welcome. And the point which is consistently made in the Bible, is that this is sure; it is sure thing. God will surely act, all the brokenness will be redeemed, the poor will rejoice, and the world will be healed. Alleluia!

The real message is, will you, and I, and the Church, be ready to welcome all this, or will we be so wrapped up in our own little worlds that we will be caught short? This is the key message of a truly Christian view of Advent: we need to be living in readiness to welcome Jesus, wholeheartedly, without reservation. The whole Church is being called to live in readiness to welcome the joyful disruption, that the arrival of Jesus among us will inevitably mean. It will happen, God is faithful. The hope is sure, even if it seems to be a long time coming, even if things seem to be getting worse in the meantime. God is faithful, and the time of rejoicing will come.

Moreover, because all the stuff about the Kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus is not just about a future fulfilment; because it is also about encountering God in the here and now; this readiness to welcome the work of God; and this assurance that his help will certainly arrive in one form or another, is deeply relevant to the present time too. The teaching of Jesus is that, as we reflect on our sure hope of a future heaven, so also we will truly begin to encounter it in the present time. The judgement of heaven is also the judgement of now.

Another message of Advent, is that God himself will give us the grace and strength we need to endure until rescue arrives. “He will also strengthen you to the end,” writes St Paul in our first reading today. He will strengthen you. Rescue will arrive, and despite all the difficulties and challenges in the meantime, you will find the strength to endure until it does.

Not for the first time in this time of pandemic, are there strong resonances with Christian themes, in what is happening in the world. Successful vaccines are on their way; the caution about how well they will work is lifting; against seemingly the odds, just when the antivax movement seems to be gathering its perverse popularity. The science of vaccines is being vindicated; and it is being vindicated even more fulsomely than expected. This is remarkable; the science has risen to the greatest challenge of our time. Films will be made,

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to tell the vaccine stories of this time; about the struggles and successes; about the helpers and hinderers; and true heroes and heroines of vaccine technology will be celebrated.

And yet the challenges remain. Because they are appalled by the Coronavirus restrictions, many people openly doubt the science of why they are necessary. Because they are generally suspicious of authority, many people prefer to believe truly wild conspiracy theories about the pandemic being just a plot by big business and deep state interests, rather than a very real threat, arising from nature just like previous plagues.

Because they are confused by the complexities of modern science, some people doubt that vaccines are actually a good thing at all. Because sometimes life is just plain difficult and unfair, people clutch at any idea that blames someone else. Whereas actually the key now, is that we should work together, and support one another as much as we jolly well can, especially caring for those who have been unlucky.

In this pandemic, it is actually the science that is riding to the rescue, in all sorts of ways, and for now we must endure. Now is not the time to doubt the science that will save us. Undoubtedly science can go wrong and be used for evil. But in truth science is a wonderful gift from God to be used well, and for the benefit of humankind, and the vast majority of scientists are in it for that purpose. Today, science is riding to the rescue, and I firmly believe that this is of God. The timing is extraordinary.

So it is depressing and ironic that the antics of some people now want to see the necessary new tiered restrictions watered down. If they are successful in doing so, just as they were successful in preventing the proposed timely circuit breaker earlier in the autumn, it will simply end up making another whole month of full national lockdown necessary sometime in the new year; just like before.

In this pandemic, it is actually faith in science that will save us, and not faith in political dogma and personal liberties. It is following the science that will prevent hospitals becoming overwhelmed, and speed effective and safe vaccines to those who need it most. Until then we must support one another, especially those most adversely affected, trust in better times to come, and seek the strength to endure. Like in the message of Advent God is not far away, he is near. The difficulties of the present time, do not mean that help is not at hand; and there is absolutely no excuse for despair.

In the message of Advent, however much the stars seem to be falling from the sky, and however much the heavens seem to be shaken, the help of God is still surely at hand. It is sure, and he does give the strength to endure. In the life of the Church it can sometimes seem like that at times the stars are indeed falling and the heavens being shaken, just as it can seem like that at times in this pandemic. But the key, whether it be Covid-free times, or the Kingdom of God in all its fullness, is not only to hope for these better times, but to prepare for them, to hope and trust in them, and to be ready for them. Amen.

CJ. 29.11.20