

Stay awake in hope

Bishop Michael's sermon for parishes, Advent Sunday: 29th November 2020

A Happy New Year to you all – yes, today, Advent Sunday, is the first day of the Church's new year, which begins on a note of expectancy, as we look for the coming of Jesus our Lord. And what does the Lord say to us at the start of this year? Mark's Gospel is very clear: he says repeatedly to his disciples: 'Keep alert ... keep awake ... what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake'.

'Keep awake'. Well, you might think, did he really need to say that to us just now. This is a time when many of us have no problem in keeping awake; it is getting to sleep that is difficult. What is keeping you awake at night? Maybe it is worry over your children, your grandchildren, your dear friend. Maybe it is concern over your own health or that of your spouse or partner. Maybe it is anxiety about your finances, or your job, or more generally the state of our society and our world. Maybe the isolation is getting to you, or you are so tired that you cannot even sleep; maybe it is some fear that seems so big in the small hours of the morning that you feel like the poet Fleur Adcock in her poem 'Things':

There are worse things than having behaved foolishly in public.
There are worse things than these miniature betrayals,
committed or endured or suspected;
There are worse things than
not being able to sleep for thinking about them.

It is 5 a.m. All the worse things come stalking in,
and stand icily about the bed,
looking worse and worse and worse.

Mental health issues have grown severely during this pandemic and the restrictions it has brought; we know that for a fact, and some of you may know it as an experience. It is not hard to stay awake at such a time.

But the wakefulness which Jesus calls for is not like this. He tells us to stay awake in expectancy, because we are looking forward in hope. This is not a hope which ignores the harshness of reality – the gospel passage describes a time of suffering, calamity and anxiety. The hope which is given to us is one which acknowledges loss, pain and sadness. But it is a real hope nonetheless.

This is the last Sunday of lockdown, and our expectation is that from next week onwards it will be possible for services to take place in our churches again. The skill and inventiveness of our clergy and laypeople in taking worship online has been amazing, and I am sure that digital

church will be part of our future from now on; but what a joy it will be when we can gather together again in person, when we can see one another face to face (through our masks), when we can pray alongside one another (socially distanced), when we can receive the sacrament (maybe in one kind only). . And as we gather again, we will be hearing and telling stories of hope that should fill our hearts with joy.

In a few weeks, we will be telling again the great story of the gift of Emmanuel. His name means 'God-is-with-us', and that is the meaning of his life: he comes in Jesus to be born among us, to share our sorrows as well as our joys, and never ever to leave us. It will be an unusual Christmas this year, but it will certainly be Christmas. Maybe, as some of the dear familiar things we are so used to cannot happen this year, and the dear familiar people we love cannot join us, we will be able to focus a bit more clearly on what it is all about. This year we celebrated Easter when the death rate from the virus was at its highest, and we were locked down in our homes: what a time to proclaim Jesus' new life bursting from the tomb. And at the darkest time of this dark year we will celebrate Christmas, feast of the shining light that never can be overcome. Here is hope for us and here is hope for our world.

And as we come back together again over the coming weeks and months in our churches and communities, we will have our own stories of hope to tell too. Stories of a people who looked out for one another and took care of the vulnerable and the isolated. Stories of workers in the health service, in supermarkets, in deliveries, in many essential jobs who carried on courageously doing their duty for us all. Stories of people who learned new skills, who adapted to new ways of living, who gave with extraordinary generosity.

Stories of people who learned to see the world in a new way, who realised that there is more to life than shopping, who started exploring what it means to pray, who found new meaning and purpose in church online. . Stories of people who came to terms with their grief and their loss and started rebuilding their lives. Stories of people who were seized with anger at the injustices of our broken world, and set about trying to change it.

We all know that there is a great deal of sadness, pain and anxiety in our world just now; but Advent reminds us that we are to look out for what is also there – the signs of hope in our churches and our communities.

Jesus calls us his people to make a conscious choice to be a people of hope. And there are two reasons why he does that. The first is, because we need hope to keep on going. The great Austrian Jewish psychotherapist Viktor Frankl, who survived the horrors of the Holocaust, grasped this when he wrote that nobody can live without hope. But if we have a hope that gives us a reason for living, it gives us a capacity to cope: 'He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how', Frankl said. He experienced a time immeasurably darker than what we have known, and yet he insisted that the most basic of human freedoms could never be taken away: 'the freedom to choose one's attitude in any given circumstances', And in every circumstance, the attitude we should choose is hope.

But this is only half of the story. We need hope – but what if there actually is no hope available to us? Then, as St Paul said, we would be of all people the most miserable. But Jesus points his disciples to a sign, the sign of the fig tree: ‘as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near’. He points us to something beyond ourselves, to something we have not imagined, to something real. That reality is not the climatic season of summer; we are as many months from that as we can be. Rather, it is the reality of Christ our sun dawning on our world, on our lives. Our hope is built on this firmest ground: that in Jesus, God has come to us, he has shared our life and our death, and he has overcome the power of death through bursting from the grave. This is the truth; it is not something we have made up for ourselves; our hope is not in vain.

This is the message we are to share with one another, with our communities, with our world. It is a message which transforms our lives and turns us from sadness to expectant joy on this Advent Sunday. Today and every day, let us make Charles Wesley’s prayer our own:

Christ, whose glory fills the skies; Christ, the true, the only Light;
Sun of Righteousness, arise, Triumph o’er the shades of night:
dayspring from on high, be near; Daystar, in my heart appear.

Visit, then, this soul of mine; pierce the gloom of sin and grief;
fill me, Radiance divine; scatter all my unbelief;
more and more thyself display, shining to the perfect day.