

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Sermon

4th December 2022

All Saints' Marseille

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Last week I was on a diocesan training course in Germany. It reminded me how dark it gets in northern Europe at this time of year - days when it barely seems to get light as thick cloud covers the landscape, and by mid-afternoon such light as there is beginning to fade. It was a relief to get back to Provence with its blue skies. Darkness and light are prominent as we move deeper into Advent.

The training course was held in the Kardinal Schulte Haus conference centre in Cologne. The building opened in 1929 as a seminary for training Jesuit priests. Twelve years later, it was commandeered by the Gestapo during the Second World War. Now the building is back to training priests again. Those 'sandwich years' of occupation during the War served as a reminder of the darkness and light found in human behaviour. The chapel in the conference centre is dedicated to Edith Stein, the German Jewish philosopher who became a Carmelite nun and who died at Auschwitz. The chapel is furnished almost entirely with metal, the pews decorated with a motif of barbed wire. I thought of my father, a prisoner of war, and how grim he would have found the chapel furniture.

I thought also of Alfred Delp, the German Jesuit priest executed in 1945 for his opposition to Nazism. Shortly before he died, Delp wrote a powerful reflection from his prison cell entitled 'The Shaking Reality of Advent'. It begins with the words: 'There is perhaps nothing we modern people need more than to be genuinely shaken up'. He notes how in the years leading up to the War people had been living with a false sense of security, but that it is when we feel our world shaking that we are able to face reality, to 'awaken from sleep', as St Paul urges, and (in Delp's words) to 'put things back where God the Lord put them', to 'set our life in God's order'.

To some extent, our times too carry a sense of being shaken in the way Delp described (though he was living through a more extreme crisis). Covid, Ukraine, economic turmoil, shortages, strikes, the climate emergency. Delp wrote: 'Advent is a time when we ought to be shaken and brought to a realisation of ourselves. The necessary condition for the fulfilment of Advent is the renunciation of the presumptuous attitudes and alluring dreams ... by ... which we always build ourselves imaginary worlds.' It is very much the message of our Gospel reading this morning, as John the Baptist proclaims: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

At this point, Delp's reflection shifts in tone. He points out that 'shocked awakening' is not our only experience of Advent. Advent is also blessed with God's promises, which 'kindle the inner light in our hearts'. In the midst of our bitter awakening, 'the golden threads that pass between heaven and earth ... reach us', giving the world a taste of the abundance it can have. Advent is a time of inner security, in which our task is to share its message of hope with others.

Delp observed that in his time (and the same is surely true of our own): 'So many need their courage strengthened, so many are in despair and in need of consolation, there is so much harshness that needs a gentle hand and an illuminating word, so much loneliness crying out for a word of release, so much loss and pain in search of inner meaning.' Advent is the promise denoting the new order of things, though we must wait for the promise to be realised. The reflection ends: 'Just beyond the horizon the eternal realities stand silent in their age-old longing. There shines on us the first ... light of the radiant fulfilment to come.' I don't know how someone writes that in the face of execution, but Alfred Delp did. In one of his last letters, he wrote: 'All of life is Advent.'

The persistent thought I had during the days spent at Kardinal Schulte Haus, conscious of its 'sandwich years', was that in the 1940s good had triumphed over evil. Evil continues to stalk humanity. It is real and it is there. We need look no further than Ukraine. But ultimately good is stronger. That's the message of the incarnation, in the great prologue of St John the Evangelist which we will hear again at Christmas: 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.'

Last week the results were published of a census taken in the United Kingdom in 2021. For the first time, in answer to the question on the census form 'What is your religion?', less than half the population replied 'Christian'. Instead, for their religion, they put 'none'. Predictably, the secular organisations have been crowing. Yet I wonder what the answer would have been if the question had been put in a different way: 'Do you believe there is a spiritual dimension to existence?' or 'Do you believe in the ultimate power of good to triumph over

evil?" I suspect many more than half of the respondents would answer 'yes' to questions like that.

The challenge for the church is to reach with its message of hope those people who write 'none' on their census forms, many of whom 'are in despair and in need of consolation', who find themselves in 'so much loss and pain in search of inner meaning'. Those longing to translate the mystery and wonder and pain and beauty of human existence into something that makes sense to them. We notice this longing particularly in Advent. People have been ringing the chaplaincy since September asking what we are doing at Christmas. 'Longing for light, we wait in darkness', in the words of the hymn writer. For, however they fill out their forms, people long for light in the darkness. They long for a time when wars will cease, when creation will live in harmony and everyone will find meaning and purpose in the knowledge of the ultimate goodness that lies at the heart things. In short, for the vision articulated in the extract from the Book of the prophet Isaiah which we heard this morning.

The extract is full of the prophet's hope of the promised Messiah, the Christ, who was to come:

'The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them ...
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain...'

That's why this reading is included in the service of Nine Lessons and Carols which we will hear again this Saturday. It's of the nine extracts from Scripture

which the Bidding Prayer in that service calls ‘the tale of the loving purposes of God’. Dean Eric Milner-Write, who wrote the prayer in the shadow of the First World War, and introduced the reading from Isaiah with the words ‘The peace that Christ will bring is foreshown’, understood that Easter was the embodiment of what this passage is about. For Easter is a new dawn, a reconciliation of creation, an overcoming of death, a proclamation of a justice that is not about vengeance. And the reason we are here today is to celebrate the fact that there was such a person as Jesus of Nazareth whom we call the Christ, and to walk in his footsteps. So let us start walking, and bring some hope to those around us.

Amen.