

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – Advent Sunday**

**1<sup>st</sup> December 2024**

**All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

We have reached Advent Sunday, the beginning of a new liturgical year. Traditionally, Advent is a time when one of those creative tensions that are part of the Christian faith is felt. We look forward to the coming of Christ at Bethlehem, as we prepare to celebrate the joy of Christmas. In that sense, it's a season of eager anticipation. But in Advent we are also encouraged to reflect on the second coming of Christ, the scriptural message that the Kingdom Jesus proclaimed would be brought to fulfilment on his return. In that sense, it's also a season of reflection on a day of reckoning that is to come, both for us individually and for the creation as a whole. A time for living more honestly about ourselves.

Each year on Advent Sunday, our Lectionary gives us one of the accounts of Jesus's teaching about the second coming. This year we have the one from Luke, whose Gospel which will form the basis of our Sunday readings in the coming months. Our extract today is a reminder that the evangelists were writing against the backdrop of brutal conflict in Judea, culminating in the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD by the forces of Imperial Rome. The writer was aware of the catastrophe, and also of the warnings about it in the Old

Testament. The disruption and anxiety of the times are reflected in the language, expressed in cosmic terms: 'There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations'. Yet the evangelist clings to the hope of redemption in Christ, with the coming of the 'Son of Man'. These Advent readings are a mixture of politics, prophecy, prayer and perseverance.

The authors of the New Testament – including Paul, writing to the early church in Thessalonica - understood that the return of Christ was imminent. Two thousand years on, the Church has learned to live with the understanding that it has not yet happened, along with the uncertainty of when it might come. This is why Advent encourages us to reflect on what might be ahead. Our times are certainly troubled enough, and there is a sense of doom abroad at the moment.

How, then, might we meditate on these texts, two thousand years on? In reflecting on this last week, I was reminded by what my colleague David Pickering said when he preached on Advent Sunday last year:

'Our Christian message tells the story of how through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has triumphed over sin and evil. The call and role of the Church down the ages is to declare and show that victory in every generation. We have the message of the presence of the Second Coming for our world today. Through the power and reality of Holy Spirit, Christ is present in our world - if only we have the eyes of faith to recognise the divine in the so-called 'ordinary'. Wherever good overcomes an evil, love defeats hatred, peace replaces enmity, healing restores a broken body or mind, a positive replaces a negative in thought, speech or action. ... [A]ll of these are the presence and reality of Christ's Second Coming in our contemporary world.'

We live in troubled times, but there *are* signs of the Kingdom if we learn how to read them. Later today, an ecumenical service will be held in Marseille at the Basilique du Sacré-Coeur, when a project will be launched through which different church denominations across the city will come together to serve the poorest and more vulnerable. It's a tiny example of what can happen when a thirst for compassion and justice takes hold. We must keep building and sustaining communities that support one another, keep returning to the God who is the source of all compassion and justice. We must live immersed in the renewing energy of God, alert to the presence of God in every person, on every street, in every heart. Trying to live a life that is spacious, grace-filled, shot through with the sense of eternity.

There were many such moments in the footage this week of the renovated interior of Notre-Dame de Paris, due to be reopened next week after the devastating fire of 2019. As politicians squabbled in the National Assembly nearby, threatening to bring down a government that will soon be forgotten, a group of two thousand artisans were shown the fruit of their extraordinary work in a building that for centuries has spoken of a longing for God, whose restored beauty took away the breath of every commentator. It felt very appropriate that the work should be unveiled on the threshold of Advent.

Advent is both a time of preparing to receive God afresh, and a reminder that we don't know the time or manner of that coming. We know from our own lives that waiting for what we expect or desire is not always what turns out to be. The season of Advent asks of us something deeper. It's about developing a wisdom and a spiritual patience that can cope with the surprises God sometimes gives us. Helping us to live more fully, more mature in our faith, as we learn to

lean deeper into God. Reading the signs of the Kingdom in our midst, however unexpected.

Recently I read a strange and beautiful example of God's unexpectedness in an article by Dennis Bailey, an Anglican priest who worked as a development consultant in Rwanda in the aftermath of the genocide there in 1994. In a reflection entitled 'Brief Encounter: a true Advent story'<sup>1</sup>, Bailey writes of a flight that he took from Kigali to Johannesburg, in which he was placed next to a nun who was pregnant. While others rolled their eyes and looked the other way, Bailey listened as the sister told her story. Caught up in the backlash of the Rwandan genocide, she had been attacked and raped. She was travelling to South Africa to be cared for by members of her order until her child was born.

Dennis Bailey was aware she was sparing him much of the agony she had suffered. Concluding her story, she said: 'I'm grateful to God for the unexpected privilege of motherhood'. He left the encounter inspired by her resilience and courage. As he tried to imagine what the child might become to a community torn apart by hatred and violence, he found himself thinking: 'Should God decide to become one of us, the transport awaits in seat number 1A'. As they arrived, he said: 'You haven't told me your name, Sister.' 'You haven't asked, Father', she replied. 'My name is Sister Immaculate.' At which point they both broke into helpless laughter.

Bailey later heard that the child had been born on St Valentine's Day and, back in Rwanda, was being raised by his mother in a Catholic orphanage. She called him Emmanuel. Which means, 'God is with us'.

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<sup>1</sup> *News of Great Joy*, ed. Hillyard-Parker (2021), p 14.

I wonder what signs of Christ's coming each of us may encounter this Advent.

Amen.