

SERMON FOR ADVENT SUNDAY AT 8am | 03.12.17

Well, here we are again: Advent Sunday – the beginning of another Church year. We say to ourselves: *where has the year gone?* and as we prepare for another Christmas we recall that for the most part we are doing very much what we did last year at this time, sending Christmas cards (or not), working out where we might be on certain days, seeing who we might meet up with and so on. The religious year works on such cycles, *the trivial round, the common task* as John Keble put it in one of his hymns, *New Every Morning*.

Yet we are also aware that this round of weeks and months, of festivals and seasons, is not quite the reality. For all kinds of reasons we are not where we were this time last year – or the year before for that matter. It isn't a rotating wheel that we are strapped to but an Archimedes screw. Life may appear to be just turning round and round but it also has an inexorable forward thrust to it too: new insights, new people, new limitations but also new opportunities for us to evaluate. People, the places where we spend the majority of our time and what people are doing around us have much more influence on what we think and how we behave than we may want to admit; and the idea that some truths are absolute whatever the context is increasingly difficult to justify.

Surely Albert Einstein's lasting legacy is that nothing is absolute - even time. The theory of relativity teaches us, both literally and metaphorically, that time depends on where we stand. More challenging still is the view that the post-modern view of time is not in terms of predictable patterns and cycles, but something far more random and chaotic – something fluid rather than rhythmic.

This is a real poser to those who make lists and who look at each year as a series of tasks met and overcome. At a more mundane level this fluidity can seem more like bad manners or a lack of empathy for other people. It is the exasperation of a party hostess who told me yesterday that, having worked all day to prepare food for her guests, she had received a text shortly before the party was due to begin from half her guests who, for whatever reason, no longer felt like coming.

Part of our experience of contemporary living is how we cope with these two models – the highly structured and the sense of just ‘doing what feels right at that moment’. Those rooted in the first wonder what has happened to a sense of obligation, duty and order? How can society flourish if everything depends on the whim of the moment?

Yet, strangely, Christian spirituality, trying to talk about how God is rather than what God is doing, describes him as the One who is not about fulfilling targets or realising ancient plans. Instead, the life of God is, first of all, about the joy-filled present moment. His gift is being totally present to us, now. He isn’t saying *I will come to you when you have got this far or done x or y*. As we will hear lots of times in this year of Mark, *now is the favourable time, this is the time for God’s will to be fulfilled. The Spirit goes wherever it wills...*

What, when the Rohingya people are subject to ethnic cleansing in Myanmar, when Saudi airstrikes are devastating Somalia, when there is so much political uncertainty? Isn’t the Brexit clock ticking inexorably with issues that must be fixed before the deadline in 2019 - including the settlement of the Irish border issue and the terms of future trade? Don’t these things matter?

And of course they do. Within Christianity there has always been, rightly, a sense of prophetic witness, an unwillingness to accept things as they are now. All the issues of our day are crying out for our attention and loving response.

But what needs to motivate us is not guilt or a sense of injustice but our willingness to draw strength from God’s promise that he will make all things right, to draw into ‘today’ the power that flows from God’s ability to defeat evil now - and in the future.

And that changes the way we do things. Instead of charging in and doing all we can in our own strength, we learn to watch, and wait and pray, seeing where God is already at work, here and now.

Which is why our Masses are so important. Here, together, we celebrate the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and in so doing we draw from the future the power we need to transform the present. Eternity is bound into what we are doing now so that we can see, feel, experience ‘the long view’.

How often do we say, in our 24/7 world we haven't time for this or that. How often night and day get blurred and we resent doing anything that can be considered a waste of time. We clutch at the little scraps of free time and hope that they will energise us for the rest. Everything has to be done yesterday and immediacy is the keyword for technology at all levels. Expectations are high.

On this Advent Sunday, the call is to wake up not stop caring; to be the people who are watching and waiting because of what God is doing. We are being called to see things differently.

Which means?

For Christians the call is not to leave the world behind because it is too frenetic. Instead we do, to the best of our ability, all that is needed, persevering with what is hard and draining, but in such a way that draws eternity into this place and this time too. It isn't for nothing that Jesus, and the prophets before him, frequently went into the desert - both a place and way of being. Desert time allows us to set all the busyness within another mode of being.

This 'time out' can appear a waste of time, dead time. Actually it is the vital cement for all that life throws at us. It teaches us patience and wisdom. It teaches us that our time for action may not be God's time for something to happen. We can't plan God in! He doesn't operate like that.

The *trivial round, the common task*: the virtue of this cycle of prayer and faithfulness is not that it is spectacular but that it makes space for God to act - and space for us to follow... not in the same way as last time of course because, by God's grace, we have grown and learned some important lessons along the way.

This strange Gospel, with its picture of dark skies and calamities, is only a variant of the modern situation of rapid change which can appear so chaotic. For other generations this somewhat apocalyptic feel was the result of war and disease. Plus ça change.

Yet God's message is simple: *I may come back at any time. Are you distracted by all that surrounds you – or are you ready?*