

SERMON FOR ADVENT SUNDAY 2019 | 01.12.19 at 8am

Isaiah 2: 1-5; Romans 13: 11-14; St Matthew 24: 36-44

I used to think that Jeremy Clarkson was funny. When he talked about cars with well known personalities on *Gear Change* after driving around a track in competition with other more or less competent drivers, he could be witty and fun.

Then he started to become a real Marmite character. He says it stems from his upbringing in Doncaster and his expulsion from Repton Public School. Nowadays, as *Grand Tour* winds down and he sits at 49th out of 50 in the *Motor Trends Magazine*, his regular outbursts about the attention being paid to climate change and his loathing of Greta Thunberg just sounds like the grumbling of yet another man approaching his 60s.

What hit me most in the article I was reading about him was his persistent claim that anthropogenic carbon dioxide is not that bad - and that there was nothing he could do about it's effects anyway. In a typical throwaway line he asked: *let's just stop and think for a moment what the consequences might be. Switzerland loses its skiing resorts? The beach in Miami is washed away? North Carolina gets knocked over by a hurricane? Anything bothering you yet?*

When Jesus cites the story of Noah and the complacency which dominated their lives, we realise that things don't change very much. Alongside Jeremy Clarkson and (let's be honest) most of the world, is the assumption that nothing we can do to change things is ever going to make any difference. On windfarms, he says that in the future, they will be described as *a reminder of the time when mankind temporarily took leave of its senses and decided wind, waves and lashings of tofu could somehow generate enough electricity for the whole planet...*

What this article threw up for me was a very real paradox. While we do live with a high degree of complacency about the future prospects for our planet and share Clarkson's believe that, just around the corner, scientists will find a solution to global warming and everything will turn out all right in the end, there is also an amazing uncertainty and fear of the future and what lies ahead in people's lives.

Conversations regularly list stories of people who are fit and healthy one day and who then have an aneurism or a stroke the next; or of the young child killed tragically on a busy side road – or as yesterday the sudden unleashing of death and injury by a terrorist on London Bridge. These things happen – and they sometimes happen to us.

And if we are not careful they can become so overwhelming that they destroy our ability to enjoy the present. For far too many the future is genuinely frightening.

Which is where Advent comes in. For Advent is neither a shrug of the shoulders and a feeling that there is nothing we can do about the major challenges of our day; nor is it that sense that the world is so full of tragedy and sadness that we have to turn up the horoscope in the Evening Standard – just in case!

Advent takes the story of Noah and asks: how are you leading your daily life? Do you keep your fingers in your ears in the belief that if you don't hear about something it won't happen or are you genuinely alive to the possibility that what is coming will be part of a plan that is bigger than any of us – and that it will be good?

Because it isn't just children who crave for something exciting just around the corner. Each of us are wired up in such a way as to feel that the future is worth looking forward to. And yet we worry about it too. The future is both promise and threat. What will it bring? As Isaiah asks, will it be *full of the oil of gladness or the ashes of mourning, the garland of praise or the spirit of heaviness?* Will the angel in today's Gospel come for us – as the ones who are ready for our glorious liberation from death - or leave us behind to drown in our own self-interest and lack of vision?

As Norah Hodge was saying yesterday as she decorated the Advent Candle stand, Advent can so easily be overwhelmed by the expectation of Christmas and all the commercialization that is now part and parcel of December. Can we take just a little time to reflect on our life in a positive way – not to dwell on the awful things that might or might not happen but on our confidence that God will see us through to the end? Bible stories like that of Noah don't let up: what happens tomorrow largely depends on what we do today. Just hoping for the best isn't good enough, Mr Clarkson.