

# Advent sermon, Christ Church Clevedon 26<sup>th</sup> November 2008



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Readings:

- Isaiah 9.2-7
- Matt 25.1-13
- Romans 8.18-25

## Introduction

Good evening...

I wonder if you know what this is? It's an illustration of a tsunami which swept up the Bristol Channel one fine January morning in the year 1607. Up and down the coast people were going about their business. A ship was preparing to set sail. Then the sea withdrew as never before. In the words of a contemporary account, people then saw "mighty hills of water tumbling over one another in such sort as if the greatest mountains in the world had overwhelmed the lowe villages or marshy grounds. Sometimes it so dazzled many of the spectators that they imagined it had bin some fogge or mist coming with great swiftness towards them and with such a smoke as if mountains were all on fire, and to the view of some it seemed as if myriads of thousands of arrows had been shot forth all at one time." Here where we stand the wave was 18 feet high. It ran "with a swiftness so incredible, as that no gray-hounde could have escaped by running before it", travelling up to 4 miles inland in both Somerset and Monmouthshire, destroying houses and farms and drowning some 2000 people. People scrambled up trees and clambered into tubs. One mother, caught naked indoors as the waters came crashing in, put her little daughter on a roof beam, where a chicken flew up to join her. The mother drowned, but the little girl was later found alive, her life saved by the warmth she'd got from cuddling the chicken. It must have seemed as if the world was ending.



Well, the world didn't end. But can we be sure that it won't happen again, maybe this very night as we take to our beds? We can't. That's what life has always been like. There are times when everything seems OK, and we get on with our daily lives, build our barns and count our money, as Jesus put it; and there are times of crisis, disaster,

times of groaning as Paul puts it - times which remind us of the bigger picture, and ultimately, remind us that we should always be ready for the end. We live flawed lives in a fallen world. We may not expect to experience a tsunami as we meet together here tonight. But we are no strangers to pain, and often things happen which bring us face to face with the pain which is inherent in the world as we know it. A sudden recession. Broken relationships. Or just the frustration of working to live out our lives as Christians in a world drowned by other voices and resistant to change.

And yet there is room in our lives for joy too. The joy of just being able to gather here together, the joy of the life in Christ that we share in the midst of this troubled world, the joy of the promises we have received and the blessings we have already experienced. We are a grateful people living in a struggling world.

Advent is the time of year when we remember all these things. It's a season of waiting, and of learning how to wait. It's a season for remembering the original waiting done by the Jewish people as they anticipated the coming of the Messiah. It's a season for focussing on our own waiting today, as we anticipate his Second Coming. Something wonderful has happened. Something even more wonderful is going to happen. Advent is for remembering the first, and anticipating the second. It's a season properly characterised by joy, but one in which we do well to remember that the other side of the coin of joy is pain. Pain firstly because as we wait for the future fulfilment of our promise, we suffer from its present absence. And pain also because of the cost of its fulfilment – the cost for this baby who is to be born, but whose birth will herald his death. A death that has something to do with us.

Let me read you a poem. It's by RS Thomas, and it's called Christmas.

There is a morning;  
Time brings it nearer,  
Brittle with frost  
And starlight. The owls sing  
In the parishes. The people rise  
And walk to the churches'  
Stone lanterns, there to kneel  
And eat the new bread  
Of love, washing it down  
With the sharp taste  
Of blood they will shed.

## What are we waiting for?

So what are we waiting for, in this season of Advent? Firstly, we are waiting for a Messiah, for a Saviour, for someone who will offer us a way out of our pain and an eternal solution to the broken world we live in. The coming of this Messiah was foretold by the prophets of ancient Israel, from Isaiah to Malachi. We heard the quintessential reading from Isaiah 9, and we will remind ourselves of their longing in the hymn *O come, O come Emmanuel*. We make advent wreaths, and we will light four candles in the four weeks of our waiting. Those four weeks themselves represent the four centuries of silence between Malachi, last of the prophets, and the birth of Christ. They represent the waiting of a people. And this is what they had waited for. This is a 15<sup>th</sup> century French illustration, made you'll be glad to know not for the purpose of accuracy but for the purpose of meditation.



So to help us meditate, let me read another poem. It's by UA Fanthorpe, and it's called *The Wicked Fairy at the Manger*:

### **The Wicked Fairy at the Manger**

My gift for the child:  
 No wife, kids, home;  
 No money sense. Unemployable.  
 Friends, yes. But the wrong sort -  
 The workshy, women, wogs,  
 Petty infringers of the law, persons  
 With notifiable diseases,  
 Poll tax collectors, tarts;  
 The bottom rung.

.....His end?  
 I think we'll make it  
 Public, prolonged, painful.

Right, said the baby. That was roughly  
 What we had in mind.

*U. A. Fanthorpe ('Christmas Poems - BC:AD', Peterloo Poets)*

I like poetry because it has a way of disjuncting our take for granted view of things. It works like parables, juxtaposing the expected with the unexpected. And the problem

with this baby was, everything about him was all so very unexpected. The Hebrew people had waited so long for the Messiah that they had built up a clear idea of what they were waiting for. They had got so much right, but so much wrong too. In a way their expectations hadn't been high enough – they were waiting for a saviour who would bring a great light into darkness, who would govern in peace on the throne of David and bring prosperity to their land and communities; for a political figure, the ruler of a new kingdom. This baby would bring far more than that; his saving would be a cosmic saving, not a geographical one, a saving far bigger than they had dreamt possible. No wonder they would fail to get their minds round it.

So here we are with the baby, starting off on the wrong foot, born in unexpected and unpromising circumstances. He makes his entrance to this world in a stable, sleeping in a pig trough, surrounded by animals and smelly shepherds and with angels zooming about the place. It was a pretty unconventional beginning. We've wrapped it up in ribbon and tamed it into children's nativities and beautiful Christmas trees, but it wasn't really like that, it was more like being born under an archway at Paddington station with an earthquake going on. And as he grew up, things got worse. He did all the things the poem says. He mixed with the workshy, women, wogs, petty infringers of the law, persons with notifiable diseases, poll tax collectors, and tarts. He broke all the rules of social and religious engagement, insulting the rabbis, losing his temper in the temple, presuming to dispense forgiveness and failing to observe the Sabbath.

And then there was his teaching. People would ask him questions, which is if you think about it what you would want to do if you got to meet with a man who you thought might be the Son of God. But he wouldn't answer them. He just asked questions back, and told weird topsy turvey stories. Why *did* he go on about mustard seeds and runaway sons and living water and people with unexpected guests, when he was just being asked simple questions about God?

I think one of the questions we do well to ask ourselves in this season of Advent, this season of waiting and remembering and waiting again, is, who exactly are we waiting for? So many of those to whom he first came rejected him because he was not what they expected. So what do we expect? What do *you* expect? So many of those we know look at images like this, and expect a fairy tale Jesus, and then dismiss him because they don't believe in fairy tales. They expect a lamb-loving angel-studded baby Jesus to grow into a picture book adult who



was meek and mild and clean and kind – this Victorian kind of Jesus. I expect you know the image, from the Christ we Share series. I am constantly surprised by people who tell me they had this image of Jesus on their wall as a child. I had a similar one, with the animals but without the Jesus – but it all boiled down to the same thing really.

Often I meet people who have encountered Jesus and experienced his love – but not in this picture book kind of way. A couple of weeks ago I met a man called Chris who told me he'd just become a Christian. How did that happen, I asked? Chris is an ordinary bloke, an odd job man, not very articulate. He didn't want to tell me, he said; it'd cause a riot. No, go on, I said. Chris said his life had been in a mess. His wife had run off with another man and he'd been forced to find himself lodgings. He was having nightmares – dark figures running towards him, with faces like the face in *The Scream*, he said, you know, like this... Terrifying. One night he was having this nightmare, and suddenly he was aware of another figure, and a great sense of being overwhelmed by love. He woke up. I thought it was a woman, he said, I thought it meant I was going to find another woman. I've only ever known that kind of love with a woman – but this was different. I can't describe it, but it was bigger, much stronger. The couple he was lodging with were Christians. Chris realised the figure offering him this love was Jesus. He's a rough and ready kind of guy, not the kind of guy you'd expect to find in church. But there he is, three weeks on, talking about how love is the only thing that matters.

So who are you waiting for, how will he come, and what will it be like when you meet him face to face?

Let me read you another poem. It's by Rowan Williams, and it's called *Advent Calendar*.

He will come like last leaf's fall.  
 One night when the November wind  
 has flayed the trees to bone, and earth  
 wakes choking on the mould,  
 the soft shroud's folding.

He will come like frost.  
 One morning when the shrinking earth  
 opens on mist, to find itself  
 arrested in the net  
 of alien, sword-set beauty.

He will come like dark.  
 One evening when the bursting red  
 December sun draws up the sheet  
 and penny-masks its eye to yield

the star-snowed fields of sky.

He will come, will come,  
will come like crying in the night,  
like blood, like breaking,  
as the earth writhes to toss him free.  
He will come like child.

*Rowan Williams (The Poems of Rowan Williams, Perpetua Press 2002)*

## How are we waiting?

So Advent is a time for remembering the waiting done by generations for the birth of a Messiah. For us that Messiah has been born, lived, has died and been raised again. Many of us have had close personal encounters with him. Others have been inspired by him, known ourselves called by him, promised to obey him. And yet still we wait. We wait this time not in Latin, but in Greek. Our word Advent comes from the Latin for coming. The Greek word is Parousia, and that's the word used in the New Testament for the Second Coming. The first part of what we waited for has come about; the second part is still to come.

How do we wait? Well, we wait for something which will come with the unexpectedness of a tsunami, the unexpectedness of sudden death. We know it will come, but we don't know when. We catch a glimpse of how we are to wait in the parable of the ten young women who are waiting with expectant hearts for the coming of the bridegroom. It's a story with a background – the image of the bridegroom was traditionally used to represent God's union with his people [Ezekiel 16; Hosea]. So the young women are waiting for Christ himself, waiting for the marriage between heaven and earth which is the coming kingdom. All are expectant. All are looking forward to meeting with their Lord. But whereas five have taken spare oil so they can be sure they are ready with their lamps to greet him, five have kept their lamps with them but not worried about the oil. The cry comes as they sleep one night: 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'. Here it is in this painting by Anita Swartzendruber. The women with no oil rush to buy some; and miss not just his coming but the whole wedding feast. 'Keep awake therefore', Jesus says, 'for you know neither the day nor the hour'.



So how do we wait? Well, anyone who knows me will laugh at the very idea of my talking to anyone at all about waiting. Waiting isn't really what I am good at. But as I've thought about it I've come up with three things.

## Suffering

Firstly, and this I do understand, waiting is about suffering. Jesus himself waited. He waited not in the first part of his life and ministry, but in the second part – from the night of his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane to his eventual death on the cross. It's W H Vanstone, in his book *The Stature of Waiting*, who points out that from this point onwards in the gospels the verbs change from active verbs, in which Jesus is making things happen to others, to passive verbs, in which others are making things happen to him. The word Passion itself means suffering, having things done to you, relinquishing control. And if this is how it was for Jesus, it must to some extent be how it is for us too. It's not a relaxed kind of waiting, a switch off the alarm and don't worry about tomorrow kind of waiting. It's an active waiting. To wait is a part of our calling, as it was for the five young women in the parable.

One Jewish rabbi puts it like this:

"The wait for Messiah is not a passive waiting, as if we were simply passing time at the bus stop, waiting for the bus to arrive. It is a passionate waiting. A deep, heartfelt longing. It is an ache for His coming, for His appearing. To properly await Messiah, our hearts need to break with the anticipation... At the same time, it is our hope of being united with Him that gives us meaning and hope every day."

So we wait. But we wait actively, purposefully. We know that we are to live with meaning and in hope; that something is required of us as we wait.



I once spent 2 days in a slum in Nairobi. They were having a gospel crusade, we were at the end of a SOMA mission there, and we were asked to be there just to pray. So we went. It wasn't a nice place. A fetid river ran through the litterstrewn mud and grass, rotten with burning rubbish and used syringes. Ragged children wandered round clutching glue bottles. Men sat by drinking booths. The gospel preachers were asking people to give money, and I got really angry. The second day I didn't want to go, but we decided as a group we would, and that we would be faithful to our commitment to pray, despite the imperfections of those in charge. I wandered round praying for a bit, and had some success in seeing off a bunch of diviners who'd come in a battered coach to oppose the rally. But I'm not really good at praying all day, so I

sat down on the grass by a half drunk man who said his name was Sam. He said he drank every day, it was the only thing that kept him sane. Why was I there, he asked. I told him, and we talked about God. After a while Sam staggered to his feet. I'm going up there, he said, to give my life to Christ. I've heard these gospel preachers before, but the reason I'm going is because this is the first time anyone's ever sat down and talked to me. I'm going there because of you. And he did. We went up to congratulate him afterwards. His eyes were shining and he was completely sober.

Even if we wait, we wait in readiness. We wait as servants. We wait in such a way as to enable others to receive the invitation that we ourselves have received. I learnt a lot that day.

## Work

So waiting requires something of us. It requires us to be willing not to be in control, willing to sacrifice our time and our comfort.

Jesus' prayer was that we would continue the work that he himself had done; 'as you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them' (John 17).

So Chris is right, and we are to share the love that we have received with others. That will mean doing all the things Jesus did, and doing them through the presence of the Spirit he sent to be with us as we wait – praying for their healing, teaching them, challenging and encouraging them, rebuking and delivering them, serving them, sharing the good news of the coming kingdom with them.

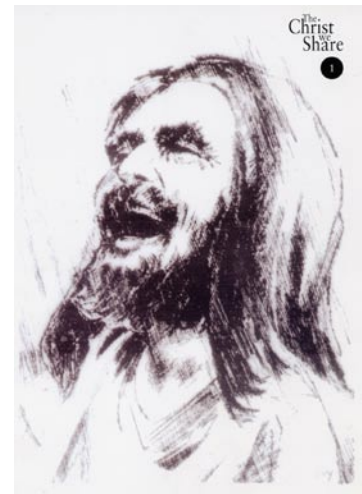
Often this can seem discouraging. People don't seem to want to know. And yet many do. It may take them a while to realise it, but in the midst of life a tsunami comes, a financial crisis looms, a relationship falls apart. Those are the times when people may be ready to look for something more, something which stretches beyond the difficulties of daily life, when they may be willing to ask whether all their busyness covers over a deeper malaise, a deeper, unexpressed questioning about life and what it's all about, and whether there's more to it than their current experience.

## Rejoicing

Finally, I suggest that there's a third aspect to our waiting. As we wait, we suffer, we work but we also rejoice. And this above all is the theme of Advent. We are waiting for something tremendous, something we are sure of, something we have already to some degree experienced. We are waiting for the bridegroom, for the love that is far stronger than human love, for the party to end all parties.

This is Henri Nouwen:

'People who have come to know the joy of God do not deny the darkness, but they choose not to live in it. They claim that the light that shines in the darkness can be trusted more than the darkness itself and that a little bit of light can dispel a lot of darkness. They point each other to flashes of light here and there, and remind each other that they reveal the hidden but real presence of God. They discover that there are people who heal each other's wounds, forgive each other's offenses, share their possessions, foster the spirit of community, celebrate the gifts they have received, and live in constant anticipation of the full manifestation of God's glory.'



*(The Return of the Prodigal Son, New York 1992, p117.)*

In our family we have an Advent Calendar. It was given to us by one of the children's godparents years ago. It's in the shape of a bell, and it has 24 pockets. You are meant to put chocolate coins in the pockets, just as centuries ago St Nicholas tossed golden coins to the poor. At first I disapproved, I thought this is a far cry from the nice religious pictures I used to find as a child as I opened the little doors on my traditional card calendar. But then I thought some more. First, I realised the little pictures had completely failed to teach me anything at all about Jesus, who I met in a completely different way at the age of 24. Second, I realised that if we are waiting for a party, then chocolate is a pretty good way to work up to it. We have something to celebrate here. We are gathered to express our confidence that when the tsunami comes, when Jesus comes for the Second time and the world ends, then there will be the beginning of a new world, a world where there will be no more mourning or crying or pain, and where we will live forever in a new heaven and a new earth.

This is American writer Dallas Willard:

'Joy is our portion in his fellowship. Joy goes with confidence and creativity. It is his joy, and that is not a small joy or a repressed 'joy'. It is a robust joy, with no small element of outright hilarity in it. For nothing less than joy can sustain us in the kingdom rightness that possesses us, which truly is a weighty and powerful thing to bear. It was not for nothing that Mother Teresa of Calcutta required her sisters of charity to be people who smile'.

(The Divine Conspiracy, Fount 1998 p 318).

Let's end with this, Arundhati Roy: 'Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing'.

That's what Advent is all about.

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