

## A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Advent 1C

2 December 2018

Luke 21.25-36

### Advent in the real world

It's all very melodramatic, isn't it – the language of Advent? The powers of heaven shaken, signs in the sun, moon and stars, the roaring of the sea and its waves causing distress upon earth and great foreboding, the day of decision coming like a trap to the unwary, the Son of Man coming on the clouds, the nations of the earth wailing.... 'Stand up!', says the Lord, 'Keep awake!....Don't get lost either in mundane concerns and worries, or in dissipation and drunkenness....' As in a melodrama on the stage, our emotions have to be fully engaged with what's going on, we have to be willing to be put through the mill of suffering, if we're to experience the overwhelming happiness of the ending.....This is just some of the Gospel material about the second Coming of Christ, and it is pretty melodramatic.

And then there are the other features of Advent – the liturgy and the hymns: darkness and light, fear and hope, the minor key of 'O come, O come, Emmanuel' with its poignantly repeated plea for salvation – and that salvation couched in the most extreme terms: '*O come, thou rod of Jesse, free thine own from Satan's tyranny: from depths of hell thy people save, and give them vict'ry o'er the grave.*' I have to admit

to always having rather liked this side of Advent, experiencing a special *frisson* of pleasure at the way it plumbs the depths and puts in the foreground themes of disaster, judgement and our extreme need of God – it's not cosy Christianity, it's a time of year when we confront the extremes. This is perhaps why it seems a shame to me when we rush too quickly to the baby Jesus and the songs of Gloria; we have to do this, to accommodate school nativity plays and special carol services, of course. But we miss something if the light is rushed too quickly into the darkness, if we lose the sense that there is a real fear in what we would be- *where* we would be - without Christ. We need to linger, if we can, with the sombre realities of Advent.

Because, of course, they *are* realities, because the world is not a cosy place. In Advent, we aren't dealing with melodrama, in the sense of a fiction designed to titillate our taste for extreme emotion. So, if I was at first attracted to Advent hymns and liturgy for that almost aesthetic reason, I now find that I need them to hold, express and shape my faith in the face of real fears. Jesus' words and our Advent worship describe the world we actually experience. We can find meaning and support for our continuing faith in the themes of advent, even if we don't necessarily have a clear idea of what the 'Second Coming' of Jesus might literally mean, nor a satisfactory explanation of why he apparently told his first disciples that all these things would happen in their lifetime, when demonstrably they didn't. Jesus has still not 'come on the clouds' (whatever those words symbolise); the earth isn't as yet subdued before his throne, evil is still rife, and disasters all too evident and imminent.

But it's precisely because this is true, - the disasters we hear of all too often - and precisely because we live with forebodings – whether about climate change and its effects, or about things falling completely apart in and for our nation — it's precise because we live in the situation that we do that the language of Advent resonates so powerfully.

I'm not in this sermon going to propound either explanations or doctrines as to what exactly this resonant language means or predicts. There's so much I simply don't understand. I'm just trying to suggest that in shaking us from cosiness and complacency, Advent says to us that it's the real world our faith deals with. It's the real world which God, in some mysterious way, has in hand. It's in the world that we know, where the future may look very alarming to our eyes, that the commands to look up, to keep hope alive, to wait for Jesus, to stand up for him, to keep awake - that is not to bury ourselves in either our private concerns, or in entertainment and distraction - it's in the face of the fears that we face in this *real world* that Christ's clarion calls are most important.

The kind of language Jesus was using in our Gospel passage, with all its extremes, is called 'apocalyptic' language. And the word 'Apocalypse' really means unveiling. One day, the Lord and his full purposes will be unveiled to us – we don't rightly know when or how, yet we hope for it, and profess our belief in it in our creeds. Till then, *this* we can say: it's often in how people and nations react to extreme and frightening circumstances and warnings that the truth about *them* is unveiled.

There's a kind of judgement in that. And it's also when we call upon God, and cast ourselves upon him in our greatest fears and catastrophes, that we may find more of his nature unveiled to us – both a judge, but also our merciful redeemer.

[I've added to the Advent hymns in this service two other hymns which might seem to some people melodramatic, but which come alive in a striking way when set alongside events in the news: '*All my hope on God is founded*' has that amazing line, '*tower and temple, fall to dust*': that became very alive to me in September 2001, when, like most of the rest of the world, I witnessed two huge towers crumbling to dust over and over again on a constant loop of TV coverage from New York. Had that hymn been written in the second half of the First Century, the words about the Temple falling to dust would have been unbearably true to those who'd seen the Romans raze Jerusalem to the ground. But, of course, the hymn hadn't been written – it didn't need to have been: Jesus had prophesied exactly this event, forty years or so before it occurred. These things happen. People face such extremes over and over again throughout history (and are experiencing them this very day, as we know). Yet, despite this, the hymn, like our Advent Gospel, calls us to confident hope.

The second hymn I've chosen which isn't usually an Advent hymn is GK Chesterton's '*O God of earth and altar*', which you may not know so well. But do think about its words as we sing it. I think you may find, as I do, that despite the fact that some of Chesterton's language leans towards the archaic (particularly in the final verse), much of the hymn could have been written as response to our

present national and international situation. In fact, it was written in 1906, and I don't know what events stirred Chesterton to pen his great plea. Although it isn't strictly an Advent hymn, I think it very clearly embodies the same message that all the imagery of Advent projects – that we stand in need of God, his intervention, his salvation, - not only as individuals, but as a society, a nation, a world. It is a plea for God to come and deliver us. And it expresses in a powerful way the mysterious truth that our hope and our salvation are found *in* the judgement of God, and not despite it. Judgement and mercy are one in him. And we individuals, societies, nations – indeed the whole of humanity - need them both.

1 All my hope on God is founded;  
he doth still my trust renew.  
Me through change and chance he guideth,  
only good and only true.  
God unknown,  
he alone  
calls my heart to be his own.

2 Human pride and earthly glory,  
sword and crown betray his trust;  
what with care and toil he buildeth,  
tower and temple, fall to dust.  
But God's power,  
hour by hour,  
is my temple and my tower.

3 God's great goodness aye endureth,  
deep his wisdom, passing thought:  
splendour, light, and life attend him,  
beauty springeth out of naught.  
Evermore  
from his store  
new-born worlds rise and adore.

4 Daily doth th' Almighty giver  
bounteous gifts on us bestow;  
his desire our soul delighteth,  
pleasure leads us where we go.  
Love doth stand  
at his hand;  
joy doth wait on his command.

5 Still from earth to God eternal  
sacrifice of praise be done,  
high above all praises praising  
for the gift of Christ his Son.  
Christ doth call  
one and all:  
ye who follow shall not fall.

1 O God of earth and altar,  
bow down and hear our cry,  
our earthly rulers falter,  
our people drift and die;  
the walls of gold entomb us,  
the swords of scorn divide,  
take not thy thunder from us,  
but take away our pride.

2 From all that terror teaches,  
from lies of tongue and pen,  
from all the easy speeches  
that comfort cruel men,  
from sale and profanation  
of honour and the sword,  
from sleep and from damnation,  
deliver us, good Lord!

3 Tie in a living tether  
the prince and priest and thrall,  
bind all our lives together,  
smite us and save us all;  
in ire and exultation  
aflame with faith, and free,  
lift up a living nation,  
a single sword to thee.

Source: [Ancient and Modern: hymns and songs for refreshing worship](#)  
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