



Reflections

Sermon Outlines for Advent Sunday, 2009

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Transforming Lives ~ Transforming Congregations ~ Transforming Communities

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I'm sometimes told I have a unique style of preaching. Some of those who say so add, 'Thank goodness!' under their breath. So these are not intended to be 'finished' sermons. I'm a quarryman; I've hewn out the rough blocks, and given them enough shape, I hope, to indicate the final design. But the detailed shaping; that has to be yours. Your hands are not my hands; your skill with the chisel is different from mine; and the final work of art will be yours, not mine. Otherwise you will not speak with your own, authentic, voice, and your words will be unconvincing. And don't be afraid to take good hard knocks at it – scripture's tough, and needs firm handling to shape it into blocks people can feel comfortable with.

The first offerings are based on the lectionary for the principle service, and the third readings for Morning Prayer. There then follow a series of other reflections, which may also prove helpful. Feel free to use, or not, as you think appropriate.

Brian Morris
Stewardship and Resources Officer

The First Sunday of Advent

In the 1960's, on Liverpool Pier Head, there used to be a poster that read, 'What Wilt Thou Do When the Lord Cometh?' Across the bottom, someone had written, 'Move St John to inside forward.' (For the young, and those not properly brought up, the Liverpool centre forward ('striker') at the time was Ian St John.)

A year ago, politicians and bankers stood wringing their hands and saying, 'No-one could have foreseen this coming!' And much of the anger that has been directed against them is an expression of the view that they *should* have been able to see it; that that was one of the things they were paid to do. They were called to be prophets; but, somehow, got sidetracked by profits. In a very real sense, for them, it was the end of the world.

"Strange!
strange. Like a new birth; stripped,
exposed
to opportunity undreamed before."
"Hold fast to that. For only those
who live in child-like innocence
enter God's kingdom", he replied.

"Lord, when you pass this way, I beg you
make this house your home." A shadow
crossed his face. "I do not think
it likely soon." And then he smiled.
"But, when the time is right, visit your
cousin Cleopas
in Emmaus. If I meet you on that road,
then, once again, I'll break bread with
you."

"Come down" he said. "Come down to earth. You're barking up the wrong tree."
I tried to draw another branch across my face, but couldn't reach it. Half an hour or more I'd hidden, safe from all the taunts I'd met on normal walks
even protected by my six strong slaves. How had **he** seen me?
This vantage point was meant for safety, for security, raising me above the crowd to satisfy my curiosity in anonymity. To such as I exposure could be dangerous. I'd heard he'd come this way and run ahead and faced the taxing climb - the wall's buttress, a moment's scramble to the first branch, and so to the limb that bore me now. I'd never guessed that climbing that sycamore would be such a key decision in my life.

"Come down", he said again. "I need you here to play the host. The party's at **your** house, in case you hadn't heard."
I almost fell at that point. "At my house?
One of us must be mad!" "Let it be me!" he laughed. "Unless you want to join me. Sanity

doesn't seem to suit you, out on that branch, dirt-coated, and a tear in your third-best robe."
"I'm scared", I said. "Of the crowd, or me?" he answered. "Both." "Fear not! I'll only bite your bread. And, with my friends, we'll have you through your gate before they know what's happening. Now jump!
Peter'll catch you!" It happened as he said.

And while the slaves prepared the feast - a banquet such as seldom they'd had opportunity to make since solitude was normal - while they toiled, we talked, and drank my best wine through the afternoon. At table, as the guest, he said the blessing, broke the bread; and, as he did so, suddenly it seemed there were no crumbs, no fragments - a clean break. And then his eyes met mine. "Well, what's it worth?" he seemed to ask. "Half of my wealth to feed the poor, and fourfold recompense to those I've robbed. Did I say that?" "You did. How does it feel to turn from saving cash to save respect and honour, peace of mind, and a new hope?"

In today's Gospel, Jesus warns his disciples about the need to be ready for 'the last days'. This was a popular image among many Jewish groups of his day, when it was believed that at this time, God's rule would be restored. To those who are unprepared - and some groups, such as the Zealots, identified these with the occupying, gentile, Roman forces - it will be a terrifying experience. But this is not the thinking behind Jesus' words; he is trying to prepare his disciples for his death and resurrection in terms he hopes they will be able to grasp. It will be, he says, as though their world is falling apart. And they just don't understand this. It's completely beyond their comprehension. After all, isn't everything going well? The Galilee years are behind them; now, at last, Jesus has made his move, and is teaching in Jerusalem - surely this is the prelude to his being recognised as the one who will redeem Israel. The wilderness years will soon be behind them.

But it is out of what follows - for them, the end of their world - through Jesus' death and resurrection, that the disciples hopes are to be realised, and God's kingdom be built in a way that will transcend their wildest dreams. And 'No-one could have foreseen this coming!' they say - at first out of despair, and then, just a few days later, out of amazement, and joy, and a new vision.

Now jump forward a generation or so, and hear Paul writing to the church at Thessalonica. Here we have a picture of life beyond the 'day of the Son of Man', of a group striving to live this new life that Jesus brings. Remember that, like us, these people belong to the 'second generation' of Christians; those who never met Jesus, and have learned about him through the accounts that others have brought to them. Paul has been concerned for the faith of this small, fragile group; and now Timothy has reported that all is well with them. This is not to say that there are no problems, but Paul is able to write to encourage them, and to rejoice with them in their commitment both to the Gospel and to each other. He echoes the words of Jeremiah; 'God has fulfilled his gracious promise', and speaks of wanting to work with them so that, together, the gifts God has given them will grow in overflowing love to each other, and to the wider world.

The beginning of Advent is no bad time to review our stewardship, because it has implications that were almost certainly far beyond our thoughts when we took our first, tentative steps in faith. 'No-one could have foreseen this coming!' is all too often our response when we realise what it might involve. Because we are called to live, not like those who look forward in fear, but like those for whom Christ's coming will bring joy, as we share with one another in our commitment to the values of the Gospel. And it is this sense of thanksgiving that is the root of our stewardship.

And when we do so; when we begin to model our generosity on God's, so that it reflects his self-giving, there can be no point at which we can say, 'That's enough.' Because now we give out of love for, and gratitude towards, God. We say to those things that tempt us with their false promises of status and security, "I see you for what you are. I give first to God in joy, and I find I have enough for my needs." Not, perhaps, for my 'wants'; but when we give first of all to God, it is amazing how small our 'wants' become. So 'may [God] strengthen our hearts so that we will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.'

Third Service Readings for Morning Prayer

It got lost in the course of moving at some point, but on the wall of my office I used to have a postcard which read, 'It was all so different before everything changed.' Many of us have lived through a lot of change – but somehow, we have a capability to focus on what changes for the worse, not for the better. Why is it almost always 'the good old days', and so rarely 'the good *new* days'?

Look at today's psalm. 'Once we had it all – long ago, when we thought we were invincible, as we moved into the Promised Land. Now we're a doormat – everyone comes and wipes their feet on us. And it's not our fault! We've kept our part of the Covenant! Come on, God! Wake up! What on earth – or in heaven – do you think

Moratorium on Magnificat

*When Mary heard her cousin say
God's promises would be fulfilled
She looked towards the coming day
And sang a song to change the world.
This is the way the world will be
When God takes on humanity.*

*But while the poor support the proud
And tyrants thrive in lands and homes
And while the hungry people crowd
Around the mighty on their thrones:
While greed and need go on and on
How dare we think of Mary's son?*

*And when it comes to you and me
To show the world a God who cares,
We duck responsibility
And hide ourselves behind our prayers.
Till we have faced our common wrong
How dare we think of Mary's song?*

*Now face to face with Mary's Son,
Who healed the sick and took the blame,
We'll let God's promise call us on –
And then we'll never be the same.
Then we can sing with heart and voice,
In God my spirit does rejoice.*

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*All you have given calls us, Lord, to praise you –
Abundant wealth through Jesus Christ our Lord –
Your peace to guard our hearts in times of trouble;
Our needs supplied, our broken strength restored.*

*Teach us to use your varied gifts with wisdom,
Sharing with others for the good of all;
May we delight in giving and receiving,
And hold each other up, that none may fall.*

*To you, our God and Father, be the glory,
For in all things the praise belongs to you;
We pledge our thankful service to your people,
That we may show your love through what we do.*

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(Based on Philippians 4:4–20 and 1 Peter 4:7–11)

Crocus Path

*The path has not been used for days,
and now is carpeted with crocuses;
a royal road of purple, white-fringed
where snowdrops nod in deference, leading
only to wood-piles, feeding colonies
of toadstools; and an old decrepit barn,
walls ivy-grown, roof slipping, lintel
sagging over doors devoid of paint.*

*It is the riches of abandonment; the wealth
that cannot thrive amid the press
of life, and will be lost when,
putting forth their leaves, the trees
reclaim the dominance of these woods.
Only now, in the bare season, beneath
the open branches, for a few short days
this gift is given, the hope of Spring, and spring
of hope beneath my feet.*

you're playing at?'

Except that, often, we've become too tired, too apathetic, even to shout at God in our anger and frustration. And we'd never admit to our anger and frustration, anyway – we think Christians aren't supposed to feel or behave like that. But dare we consider that that might be part of the problem? How often have we 'lost' God because we can't accept the reality of who he is – and of who we are? We hide in our protective cells, afraid to let anyone see what's really inside

– especially God! – and become deaf to the knocking with which he tries to attract our attention. Our congregation grows older, and smaller, and it gets harder to carry on as we always have; but we do so grimly, because the alternative is to change, and to change is to admit that we might have been wrong for so many years.

Isaiah knew a people who felt like that. A generation had grown up in exile, desperately trying to hang on to their faith – but without the Temple, how could they offer the proper sacrifices? And without the sacrifices, how could they be sure that God was listening, and would hear them?

'It doesn't matter' says God. 'No-one can take away the Law if it's where it ought to be – in your heart. And if it's there, it will make itself known, in the way you live; not just in what you *do*, but in who you *are*. You will become the people I always meant you to be; a real people, not those who are lost in the past.

Paul echoes these words as he writes to the Christians in Rome. 'Wake up!' he says. 'Come out of the dream, and live like the people you really are – the people in whom Jesus is alive, and who now show him to the world. The good new days are about to begin!'

At its core, this is the message of Christian stewardship. 'Wake up!' 'Get real!' 'Become the person God created you to be!' In one parish recently, someone said, 'If someone comes to my door asking me to sponsor a charity, I'm quite happy to sign up for a standing order for £2 or £5 a month – but in church, it would feel wrong not to put something on the plate. Why do I feel like this?' My answer was that

the most important thing we bring to the offertory is ourselves – ‘we offer you our souls and bodies’. If you need something to symbolise that to make it real for you, then do so. If you don’t, using standing orders will make your treasurer’s life a little easier!

But if it’s to be real for you, it also needs to be a real offering. Real in a way that makes sense to you, reflecting the kind of God you meet when you worship. If that God is a stern, remote formal figure, approached with guilt and fear, our attitude in what we offer is likely to be ‘What’s needed?’ And ‘What’s needed?’ can all too easily become ‘How little can I get away with?’

But the God that Jesus reveals is a God who cares for each one of us; who runs to meet us when we stray; who, when we turn to him, says, ‘Great! Pull up a chair and let’s have a really good heart-to-heart! A God who, when things get tough, puts an arm round your shoulder and says, ‘Don’t worry! We’re in this together!’ And faced with such a generous love, what is our response to be?

The greatest danger in our stewardship is that we retreat into a kind of legalism. I’ve been in churches where the view is taken that anyone giving less than 10% of their income isn’t really trying! This has two dangers; it means that, for those whose circumstances may mean that 10% is an impossible target, it creates a sense of guilt, of being a second-class member of the church – which is hardly the embodiment of a Christian attitude. Secondly, it means that those who are in the fortunate position where giving 10% of their income makes no significant difference to their lifestyle may not hear the call to sacrificial living that lies at the heart of the Gospel.

When I began working in stewardship, there was a slogan, ‘Give until it hurts!’ That’s all very well, but people have different pain thresholds! What usually happens is that those who wince the moment money is mentioned – the ones who suffer from wasp’s disease, who are inclined to clutch at their wallet and cry, ‘I’ve been stung!’ – are cosseted by those who are more willing to suffer for the sake of others.

Inspired by love and anger

*Inspired by love and anger,
disturbed by endless pain,
aware of God's own bias,
we ask him once again:
'How long must some folk suffer?
How long can few folk mind?
How long dare vain self-int'rest
turn prayer and pity blind?'*

*To God, who through the prophets
proclaimed a diff'rent age,
we offer earth's indiff'rence,
its agony and rage:
'When will the wronged be righted?
When will the kingdom come?
When will the world be gen'rous
to all instead of some?'*

*God asks: 'Who will go for me?
Who will extend my reach?
And who, when few will listen,
will prophesy and preach?
And who, when few bid welcome,
will offer all they know?
And who, when few dare follow,
will walk the road I show?'*

*Amused in someone's kitchen,
asleep in someone's boat,
attuned to what the ancients,
exposed, proclaimed and wrote,
a Saviour without safety,
a tradesman without tools
has come to tip the balance
with fishermen and fools.*

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Dedication

*Lord, you call us to your service,
Each in our own way.
Some to caring, loving, healing;
Some to preach, or pray;
Some to work with quiet learning,
Truth discerning,
Day by day.*

*Life for us is always changing
As your work we share.
Christian love adds new dimensions
To the way we care.
For we know that you could lead us,
As you need us,
Anywhere.*

*Seeing life from your perspective
Makes your challenge plain,
As your heart is grieving over
Those who live in pain.
Teach us how, by our compassion,
We may fashion
Hope again.*

*Lord, we set our human limits
On the work we do.
Send us your directing spirit,
Pour your power through,
That we may be free in living
And in giving
All for you.*

Marjorie Dobson

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At its root, failure to give is failure to love. It's a refusal to grow up, and accept responsibility for that part of his creation that God has placed especially into our hands and said, 'Love this for me. Care for it, feed it, watch it grow; and then bring it to me and show me what you've done with it, so that we can rejoice it in together.' And instead, we reject what is ours, and sit and long for some other part, some other gift, so that we can bring to God what we want. And when we do so, we weaken the whole body of the church.

And so this Advent is a call to hear, afresh, that call to love; that call to give; that call to dare once more to grow in faith and hope and love, and to share these gifts with others.

Other Resources

Christian stewardship is what I do after I say, 'I believe'. It reveals over what parts of my life Christ is really the Lord.

*You asked for my hands
that you might use them for your purpose.
I gave them for a moment then withdrew them
for the work was hard.*

*You asked for my mouth
to speak out against injustice.
I gave you a whisper that I might not be accused.*

*You asked for my eyes
to see the pain of poverty.
I closed them for I did not want to see.
You asked for my money
that the golden streets of the new Jerusalem
might be built throughout the earth.*

*I gave you my small change
so that I would not become poor for your sake.*

*You asked for my life
that you might work through me
I gave you a small part that I might not get too involved.*

*Lord, forgive my calculated efforts to serve you
only when it is convenient for me to do so,
only in those places where it is safe to do so,
only when it costs me little,
and only with those who make it easy to do so.*

(Based on a prayer of Joe Seremane)

*Lord, You can't help overflowing
Into all things, near and far;
Love, eternally outgoing,
Is what makes You what You are.
In our music, in our verses,
We are quick to praise Your name;
May our bank accounts and purses
Be as quick to do the same.*

*Be Yourself our motivation;
Be the reason why we give;
Let your shared imagination
Shape the style in which we live.*

*In our being, in our doing
By Your grace we'll work with You,
in self-giving self-renewing
Easter people, through and through.*

© Elizabeth Cosnett

*It was the rabbits I was watching
across the field where the last crop
of cauliflowers, now brown and over-ripe
bent to the soil. It was the rabbits,
not the silent launching buzzard
from the tree two hundred yards away
whose stoop across the hedge
shattered their tranquil grazing, as God
the predatory dove, disturbs, descending,
our complacency when we cease watching
in our busyness.*

Trefdraeth

*Here, it is always yesterday. No-one hurries;
there is always tomorrow, or the day after,
or next week, when there will be
another seven Sundays. Even the tide
runs slower at the Parrog, where seagulls
lazily turn the shingle.*

*Do not be misled
by the quiet. Come instead
when the winter sunset underneath
the clouds creates a bonfire over
Dinas Head which breaking waves
struggle to extinguish. Then,
out of the darkness between the rocks
note the small light as the fishing boat
returns to safety. And envy
the calm way nets are folded, rope
is coiled, in slow movements
while the wind batters your face
with stinging ice.*

*It is the lesson
learned in these streets applied,
the patient mastery of elements
unseen, running with wind and wave
in darkness till the lights of harbour
promise home.*