

Churches Together in Westminster

Advent Evening Liturgy

Sunday 2 December 2018 at 6pm

The Revd Lindsay Meader

Good evening and welcome to St James's Piccadilly. It's great to come together from across Westminster as we mark the beginning of the special and holy season. Advent is a time of expectation and preparation when we look for the coming of the light at the darkest time of the year, and to symbolise this, at the end of the service – during our final hymn – we invite you to come outside into our courtyard to gather round our Advent fire.

There will also be the opportunity after the service – before coming back inside for refreshments - to view the special installation in our garden. It's called the Hart of London – a life-size white hart, created from recycled plastic milk bottles and zip ties by artist Faith Bebbington to highlight plastic waste and encourage people to recycle more. It looks particularly spectacular at night.

This year during Advent, we will be holding a contemplative space for an hour each day from here in St James's to help us properly observe this season. It was the brainchild of our Churchwarden Deborah, who wanted to ensure that amidst all that happens on this busy site, that we could, and I quote, "make Advent more Advent". Each week from Monday to Saturday there will be daily readings, one from the Bible and another from a whole variety of sources, and prayer and silence. Everyone is welcome so if you're interested, you can pick up a booklet from the table over in our prayer corner, or you can find all the details on our website. Each of the first three weeks has a theme, and we'll be using those themes as our starting point for tonight's service.

I saw my first Christmas display this year in August – before the Bank Holiday at the end of the month. It's been a long time coming, but finally the Beginning is Nigh; finally Advent has begun.

So let us begin with a prayer:

**God of hope, who brought love into this world,
be the love that dwells between us.
God of hope, who brought peace into this world,
be the peace that dwells between us.
God of hope, who brought joy into this world,
be the joy that dwells between us.
God of hope, the rock we stand upon,
be the centre, the focus of our lives
always, and particularly this Advent time. Amen.**

Reading Mark 13.33-37

Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come.

It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

Watch therefore—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.

And what I say to you I say to all: Watch."

Reading Excerpt from Teaching a Stone to Talk by Annie Dillard

At a certain point, you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world, Now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourself and wait, listening. After a time you hear it: there is nothing there. There is nothing but those things only, those created objects, discrete, growing or holding, or swaying, being rained on or raining, held, flooding or ebbing, standing, or spread. You feel the world's word as a tension, a hum, a single chorused note everywhere the same. This is it: this hum is the silence.

The silence is all there is. It is the alpha and the omega, it is God's brooding over the face of the waters; it is the blinded note of the ten thousand things, the whine of wings. You take a step in the right direction to pray to this silence, and even to address the prayer to "World." Distinctions blur. Quit your tents. Pray without ceasing.

Reflection

Our first Advent theme is *Slowing, Stopping, Waiting*

The game's afoot out in the city. Only yesterday one of our churchwardens came into the rectory commenting on how the shoppers already have their elbows out in the growing crowds of those pursuing presents, decorations and all manner of festive accessories. For many Christmas is all but here, we've had time to be acquainted with all the big Christmas ad campaigns. Now that December is finally upon us, it seems the commercial world goes into overdrive, while here in the church, we begin our preparations, not, ideally, with frenzied activity, but rather by seeking to slow down, to at least partially withdraw from the seasonal surge of busy-ness and social rounds and to prepare our hearts and souls, once again, for the coming of Christ.

We are invited into a kind of holy hibernation, invited to take and make time to withdraw from or opt out of the festive frenzy and obligatory soundtracks and to seek to connect at a deeper level with a world in waiting. It starts with stopping, with being still and wholly attentive. At home at night, when it is dark and silent, we hear the sounds we usually don't notice during the day. Usually the most prominent of these is the hum of the fridge. Annie Dillard writes of a parallel but deeper and richer experience in prayer, of how when we stop, still ourselves and wait in the natural world, *we will eventually feel the world's word as a tension, a single chorus note everywhere. This is it, this hum is the silence.* For the writer, it is in this silence that she enters into the presence of God.

In our contemporary world, waiting is so often portrayed as something negative – we're used to express checkouts and next day delivery. Many of us become frustrated if we don't get a reply to an email within the hour. In some restaurants you can now download an app and pay by phone if the idea of having to ask your waiter or waitress to bring you the bill is too time-consuming.

Waiting is becoming a lost art. One of my favourite antidotes to this comes at the end of extraordinary wildlife documentaries when we are shown how film crews sometimes have to wait for hours, days and even weeks, usually in remote locations in order to capture a rare species or a particular event or pattern of behaviour in the animal kingdom. One of the most affecting and compelling tv moments was of the pilot whale, grieving for her calf, carrying it in her mouth as she swam slowly through the ocean, unable to let it go for days after it died.

On 20 June last year, technical problems at the BBC meant that news reader Huw Edwards was left sitting behind the newsdesk for four minutes of silence before the programme could begin. BBC One viewers saw a screen apologising for the glitch and promising to return to the studio as soon as possible but viewers on the BBC News channel got to sit it out with Huw, watching him live on air, sitting in silence for four whole minutes, frowning slightly but waiting patiently, occasionally making a note on the paper in front of him.

Viewers were transfixed and the clip soon went viral. A television critic described it as “a strange and mesmerising experience, a sort of drop of tranquillity in the stormy ocean that is TV news” while viewers comments included “absorbing, kinda like a lava lamp” and “the sight of Huw Edwards looking slightly worried is how I imagine the world would end.”

In Advent, we are encouraged to wait, sometimes in the dark, to hone our senses, our awareness, to the signs and presence of God in our midst. We look to the promise of Christ to bring light in our darkness. We wait, not for the end, but for the One who comes to make all things new.

And so we pray:

From rushing round to stillness,
O God, we come.
From being pulled in all directions
to the simplicity of this moment,
O God, we come.
Help us to realign
our will with your will
and our spirits with your Spirit
as we reach out to you
in the silence. Amen.

Isaiah 51.1-6

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

Reading God's Grandeur by Gerard Manley Hopkins

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs--
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Reflection

Our second theme is *Apocalypse now*. *Change is afoot, newness stirs, the unexpected is revealed*.

As another month begins, and the year nears its end, here in the UK we lurch ever further into the Advent of Brexit with little idea what it will actually look like when we get to March. As we enter Advent, we continue to lament the ongoing tensions in the Holy Land. We live in times of political unrest between and within nations, and we lament also the devastating conflicts still raging in Syria, and the equally heartbreaking reports we see from Yemen, where we are warned that 13 million people could be facing the worst famine in the world in 100 years".

We are mindful of the growing numbers of people leaving their home countries to escape war and tyranny. We are mindful of the bold and often bare faced lies told by people in positions of political power. The Chinese proverb about living in interesting times has never seemed more apt in my lifetime.

But of course, the word apocalypse doesn't mean the end of the world, or even the end of the world as we know it, but rather an uncovering – a disclosure of knowledge or revelation. In the darkest of nights, far from any light pollution, where you cannot make out your hand in front of your face, a single flame can make a profound difference. It was Fr Samuel Rayan, who at the Christian Conference of Asia in 1984, held in Singapore, who said "A candle-light is a protest at midnight. It is a non-conformist. It says to the darkness, "I beg to differ." It is in the darkness of these current tribulations that we yearn for the light of Christ to bring that transformation and fulfilment into our unsettling age.

I wonder what images come into your mind when you hear the word Apocalypse? Immediately I think of the footage we've recently seen of the cataclysmic wildfires in California voraciously consuming thousands of acres of land, razing buildings and homes and vehicles, and claiming the lives of those unfortunate souls who were unable to outrun or outdrive the terrifying walls of flames. It seems that with each passing month the effects of climate change, or climate disruption, are becoming ever more apparent for those with eyes to see. Such is the urgency, that many of those attending the COP24 Climate Change conference in Poland which was due to start tomorrow, has started today, due to the pressures on negotiators to make progress.

I wonder what Gerard Manley Hopkins would have made of our world today, of the effect of our actions upon the environment. His evocative poem, *God's Grandeur*, recognises both the damage we wreak upon the earth through industrialisation and also and humankind's seeming blindness to the presence of God – *God's Grandeur* – in the natural world. today. Writing in 1877, he saw all too clearly how industrial progress was weakening our relationship with the earth, alienating us from the goodness and the God-ness of creation:

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

*and all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares our smell: the soil
is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.*

Hopkins wondered at how “nature is never spent” and that still, “there lives the dearest freshness deep down things”, that the work of the Creator still shone out in the renewal of nature and the new dawn each day. I wonder if he would still feel that way today. As we face an uncertain future, we can find hope in the words of a contemporary poet, and former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, who still has eyes to recognise God’s grandeur:

*Earth is a hard text to read. But what we can be certain of is that the screaming mob is insubstantial mist;
in the clear sky, the thundering assertions fade to nothing. There the Lamb’s song is sung, and what it
celebrates is the apocalypse of a glory pain lays bare.*

And so we pray:

Christ our Advent hope,
bare brown trees,
etched dark across a winter sky,
leaves fallen, rustling,
ground hard and cold,
remind us to prepare for your coming;
remind us to prepare for the time
when the soles of your feet will touch the ground,
when you will become one of us
to be one with us. Amen.

Isaiah 9.2-7

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Reading Excerpt from **Revelations of Divine Love** by Julian of Norwich

God wants to be thought of
as our Lover.
I must see myself so bound in love
as if everything that has been done
has been done for me.
That is to say,
the Love of God makes such a unity
in us
that when we see this unity
no-one is able to separate oneself
from another.

Reflection

Our third theme is *O come Emmanuel*.

It seems that as we become more disconnected from the earth, so we become more estranged from God and one another. The God who is and was and was to come is and was and has always and will always be relational – Creator, Christ and Spirit. In God, love is not a noun but a verb. God can only love.

Advent is a time not just for waiting, but for reflecting in the silence and stillness, or at least in contrast to all the activity around us, not just of the coming of Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, but of the future that the Christ child embodied, taught, lived and made manifest on earth, the kingdom we glimpse in him and in those who work hard to follow him. In Advent, we recognise our need, and the world's need for reconciliation, for transformation, for wholeness.

Over two thousand years ago, in times of political unrest, of rumours and gossip, of tyrants and power struggles, of infanticide and oppression, God broke into our world as a helpless baby to be with us, in all the ordinariness and mud and muck of the stable. God with us in the mess and muddle of human relationships; God with us in uncertainty and anxiety; in oppression and poverty.

As we look to this coming – and this coming again in whatever shape or form it will take – we realise that God loves us unconditionally, that God loves us enough to take on our vulnerability and our woundedness; our struggles and uncertainty. In Matthew's Gospel, this is the hallmark of Christ's entire life – it features at the beginning and the end of his Gospel: Emmanuel, God with us; the babe born unto us in the stable grows into the resurrected and ascended Christ whose last words to his followers are "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age".

God breaks into our world and lives alongside and among us to bring hope to those in despair, light to those in darkness, freedom to those in captivity, to walk with those who are most vulnerable, to be a voice

for the voiceless. Christ comes to restore dignity to the downtrodden and to show compassion for those whose human rights are abused. Christ comes to reconcile.

The 14th century anchorite and mystic, Julian of Norwich, understood this aspect of God at a very deep level. Years ahead of her time, drawing on the years she spent in examining her *shewings*, or divine revelations, she reflected the language of the Song of Songs in describing God's passion for us:

*God wants to be thought of
as our Lover.*

In these simple words, she is already pointing to the connectedness that is vital if we are truly to be God's people. She continues

*I must see myself so bound in love
as if everything that has been done
has been done for me.*

This may at first sound self-centred, but it speaks to me of the many Gospel stories we read of Christ, Emmanuel, encountering the lost, the outcast, the crippled, the lame, all manner of people in need, and the quality of attention he gave them, as if, for the length of that encounter or conversation, they were the sole focus of his attention, as if they were the only person in the world. This must have been especially painful for the man who was leading Jesus to his house to save his sick daughter from death, only to find that Jesus gets way laid - and seemingly willingly so - by the woman with the haemorrhage, whilst precious vital minutes go by. And yet whenever Jesus performs a miraculous healing the result is always that the person concerned is restored in terms of their relationships, the former outcast is once again accepted into the community.

As Julian discerned, hundreds of years ago

*... the Love of God makes such a unity in us
that when we see this unity
no-one is able to separate oneself
from another.*

And so we pray:

In this Advent of expectation
draw us together in unity,
that our praise and worship
might echo in these walls
and also through our lives and our city.
In this Advent of expectation
draw us together in mission,
that the hope within
might be the song we sing,
and the melody of our lives and our city.
In this Advent of expectation
draw us together in service,
that we may know you
and be prophets of your love and hope
in your world and our city today. Amen.

