



the clock is ticking

I imagine these last seven days have been both exhilarating and exhausting for news editors and reporters. It's been the kind of week where it feels that if you stray from your preferred news source for more than a couple of hours, you'll be two or three steps behind the latest developments.

On Monday anticipation was growing around the House of Commons vote on the Prime Minister's latest Brexit deal. Fifteen minutes after Michael Gove assured reporters that the vote would take place the next day, Number 10 announced that it would be delayed. So on Tuesday, speculation was growing, not as forecast around the vote on the deal, but rather on whether or not the Conservative party would be holding a no confidence vote in its leader. The requisite 48 letters to the 1922 Committee were duly confirmed on Wednesday morning, and the vote took place later that evening while the country held its breath, waiting to discover whether or not a new Prime Minister was imminent. Having been confirmed in post just after 9pm, Theresa May was back in Brussels the next day to seek further negotiations. By Friday, after a much-publicised tense conversation between the Prime Minister and European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker, the EU said there could be 'clarification but not renegotiation.' And so one week on, after another dose of political turmoil and much rhetoric, invective and divisive language, it seems we are back where we started, awaiting the House of Commons vote on the Prime Minister's latest Brexit deal, except we are now another week closer to the Brexit deadline. The clock is

ticking. The future is unknown and uncertain and many are anxious.

Meanwhile in other news, the 'gilets jaunes' protests in Paris have continued; a 26 year old man appeared in court in New Zealand charged with the murder of 22 year-old British backpacker Grace Millane; at a Christmas market in Strasbourg, 3 people were killed and 12 wounded by a gunman who was later shot dead by French police; and a 7 year old Guatemalan girl died of shock and dehydration after being taken into custody at the US border. I don't recall hearing much good news this week. Even what sounded at first like a bit of seasonal trivia was also concerning – the reindeer population in the Arctic has fallen by more than half in the last two decades due to climate change.

You may recall that on Advent Sunday 3 years ago, to highlight the issue of climate change, Sara Mark created one of her ice installations here in church. As many of you will remember, she filled an oil drum with water and froze it and then placed the drum shaped block of ice on an empty drum at the back of the centre aisle. A microphone was placed within the installation and so throughout the day, including throughout that Sunday's services, we could hear the insistent dripping sounds as the ice gradually melted. The sound and the installation were 'deliberately intrusive' to remind us of what is happening to ice caps thousands of miles away, to prompt us to engage with something we might rather ignore, not because we don't care, but rather because the inconvenient truth seems overwhelming and we are

uncertain as to how we can make any kind of difference.

I was reminded of that installation unexpectedly on Friday. It being my day off, I decided to take a late afternoon stroll along the South Bank. I began by the Southbank Centre and walked along to London Bridge. As I neared the Tate, I was stopped in my tracks by an unusual sight: there in the lamplight in front of the building were 24 large irregular white shapes on an area of paving that looked as if it had had heavy rain. There were people walking in and out of the shapes and, of course, taking photos. The white shapes were opaque and looked like ice. I moved closer, took off one glove and touched one. It was smooth, pure white but not as cold as I was expecting. I wondered if it really was ice. As I explored further and read the poster on the outside wall, I discovered the shapes were indeed ice and not just any old ice.

This was *Ice Watch*, an installation by artist Olafur Eliasson, working with geologist Minik Rosing. The 24 huge chunks of ancient ice – each weighing between 1.5 and 5 tonnes, were fished out of Nuup Kangerlua fjord in Greenland, having become detached from the ice sheet. Warmer climates have caused the Greenland ice sheet to lose around 200-300 billion tonnes each year. The poster encouraged interaction with this installation, shaped rather like an ancient stone circle: “Put your hands on the ice, listen to it, smell it, look at it – and witness the ecological changes our world is undergoing.”

It was a beguiling experience – the ice was very dense and smooth, and utterly silent, just like the hushed stillness you get when there is snowfall. I marvelled at this experience of something so ancient and natural and almost other-worldly here in London. Just as with our last two large art installations here in church – *Flight* and *Suspended* – there was a remarkable resonance in knowing that these were not models or recreations but that these were

real and authentic. Just as the boat, buoyancy aids and clothes had been worn and used by real people, so these mysterious elemental entities had spent hundreds if not thousands if not millions of years in Greenland. I marvelled also at the silent wonder of such a wake up call. As John the Baptist warns his listeners, we too must repent, we must change our ways in terms of how we treat the environment and the planet.

I remembered then that it was two weeks ago today, on Advent Sunday, that the COP24 Climate Change Conference in Katowice, Poland began a day early, as the delegates recognised the urgency of the challenges they faced. I wondered what the outcome had been and then discovered last night that the conference ended yesterday - a day late - with the announcement that the 196 states represented had finally secured an agreement on a range of measures that will make the Paris climate pact operational in 2020. There will be some flexibility in the rules for poorer nations along with compensation for developing countries for the impact of rising temperatures. One commentator described the agreement as ‘not what is necessary, but what is possible’. Clearly there is no cause for complacency here but nonetheless, and especially when viewed in the light of Brexit, it is encouraging to see progress, to see people having difficult discussions and yet coming to an agreement and of course, to see so many taking this vital issue seriously.

For those who are tempted to despair at the state not just of our nation but of our world today, we need to heed the words of Zephaniah, the Old Testament prophet who tells of a time when God’s promises will be fulfilled and the future made good. This prophecy also reflects God’s concern and care for the poor and outcast: *And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.* When I visited New Zealand some years ago, I became very aware of how

many islands in the Pacific are at greatest risk if sea levels rise. In climate change too, it is often the poorer countries and communities that are hardest hit.

John the Baptist, the central character of our Gospel both last week and this week, didn't mince his words, calling those who came to be baptised a 'brood of vipers'. He stands out as a lonely somewhat ferocious figure who is more concerned at being heard than being popular. His urgent call warns his listeners that it is not enough to rely on the faith of their forebears, but that they themselves must live lives worthy of their calling as God's people. They rightly ask, what then should we do?

John tells them to live and act with integrity and generosity, citing simple examples – those with more than one coat and more than sufficient food should share with those who have none; tax collectors collect only what they are due and soldiers should be satisfied with their wages and not extort others. These may not sound dramatic, but they echo and emphasise the themes of Zephaniah's prophecy, that in the exaltation of the humble and lowly, there is what Angela Bauer-Levesque describes as "both a divine rejection of the abuses of power and a divine promise to protect the weak and the outcast." It's also important to note the realism here – just as Jesus, when he came, told people that they should pay their taxes,

but only what was due, so here, he does not tell the tax collectors or the soldiers to renounce their occupations, but stresses that they must act justly. What's being demanded is personal integrity.

Luke tells us that the prophecy John speaks with many exhortations is good news, even though the exhortations may not sound like good news. But of course, John and Zephaniah's prophecies bear the same message, that one who both is God and is sent by God is coming into the world, coming, in the words of Zephaniah, in the midst of the people. This is Emmanuel, God in our midst, God with us. This is indeed a source of joy, that the One who is aware of our mistakes, our failures, our shortcomings and pain yet still looks on us with love, is coming into our midst, with the Holy Spirit and fire, that we may see just how brightly burns that love.

In the meantime we are called to keep awake, to listen to the message of the meltwater; to change where we know we are falling short, and to strive to be bringers of good news in our troubled and weary world. We are called to put our trust in the God who is with us even now. We are called to share the good news. The clock is ticking. The future is unknown and uncertain and many are anxious . . . Amen.

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