

## Sermon preached at St James's Piccadilly London

The Revd Lindsay Meader

Advent Sunday 2016 - Sunday 27 November 2016

Isaiah 2:1-5, Matthew 24: 36-44



### Advent People

So, here we are. The beginning of a new church year. Advent Sunday. It's one of my favourite days of the year, and this year it's seemed a long time coming. Nonetheless, finally we're here, and it's great to light the first of our Advent candles and welcome our much loved nativity figures back into the heart of our liturgies as we journey into this sacred season.

There is a sense of the apocalyptic about Advent and its traditional themes, known as the four last things: death, judgement, heaven and hell. Certainly our reading from Matthew's Gospel today has that sense about it. It is focussed not on the beginning, as in the news of the coming birth of Christ. It's not, as we might expect, the proclamation of John the Baptist, but rather a passage from toward the end of the Gospel.

In Advent we endeavour to focus on our Old Testament readings, from the prophets, but it's important to note that these words from the Gospel focus on Christ's return, reminding us that Advent is so much more than anticipating the birth that happened over 2000 years ago. It's about looking to the future, to an unknown time.

Our reading from Isaiah contains some beautiful promises and some wonderful images, of all the nations going to God's holy mountain seeking to live in peace, and yet today, from a world ravaged by war, we may well be forgiven for thinking, as Mary did when faced with Gabriel's proposition, "How can this be?"

Two images resonated strongly with me from today's passage from Isaiah, and both connect with the recent trip Jo Hines and I made to Bosnia last month, with the organisation *Remembering Srebrenica* to learn about the 1992-1995 war.

The first image, is not so much of the holy mountain, but of the streams of people, from every nation, flocking to it in search of judgement and justice: "In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; *all the nations shall stream to it.*"<sup>1</sup>

I suspect most of you, like me, have lost count of the number of images we've seen this year, and in previous years, of streams, and sometimes literally oceans, of people fleeing from war and persecution; bedraggled, shocked, despairing; people of all ages, carrying what few possessions they consider most important for survival, sometimes only the clothes they stand in and setting out, often on foot, leaving behind homes, livelihoods and everything that was once familiar.

In Srebrenica, our delegation learned firsthand from a survivor about "the Column" also known as the Death March, of thousands of Bosniaks, Muslim men and boys aged between 12 and 77, who fled up into the hills to escape the Serbian forces in July 1995. "The Column" was shelled and many killed, others were captured or were duped in surrendering at the promise of no harm, only to be led to their deaths. In the

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 2:2

course of just a few days, over 8000 were massacred.

These images of people *fleeing from* make Isaiah's prophecy of people of all nations *flocking to* God's holy mountain to learn the ways of peace, so very powerful and vivid. What is also so striking is the words of invitation they offer one another, "Come, let us go . . . come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!" We light our Advent candles as a sign of our trust in the promise that darkness shall not prevail and that the powers and principalities of this world will one day be overthrown by the God of peace.

The second image which resonated so strongly with our Bosnian trip is the promise of turning "swords into ploughshares . . . spears into pruning hooks", crafting weapons of war into tools of peace and community for sharing and abundance; it is such a beautiful promise that our hearts yearn to see it fulfilled. And yet still we hear that refrain from the world as we know it, "How can this be?"<sup>2</sup>

It was a very sobering and strange experience to spend time in Sarajevo, a city that looks normal and fully functioning, except that the facades of so many blocks of flats are still pockmarked and riddled with bullet holes, a reminder that only 21 years ago it looked not unlike Aleppo today, the buildings burned and bombed out, the streets bearing numerous craters from mortars from a 47-month long siege.

One of the most common sights I initially found most shocking in numerous shops was that of small tanks and warplanes crafted out of bullet and shell casings. It seemed a very macabre take on swords into ploughshares or spears into pruning hooks and a very far cry from conflict into community. Nonetheless, there were not

just tanks and planes, but also pens, which I could recognise as tools of transformation in the writing and sharing of stories.

In thinking about these souvenirs, I was later reminded of how Rachel Treweek, the first female diocesan bishop in the C of E, was presented at her consecration with a pectoral cross fashioned out of bullet shells found on the battlefields of Mozambique's civil war. The Diocese of Gloucester's website explains: "Bishop Rachel was very involved with a link with Mozambique for a number of years during her time as an Archdeacon in London. The pectoral cross tells the story of Mozambique's journey to peace after the post-colonial civil war which ended in 1992. The Christian Council of Mozambique set up the project, Transforming Arms into Ploughshares, in 1995, which transforms recycled weapons of war into art, as a tool for peacebuilding and more importantly, peacekeeping in post-conflict societies. To date over 900,000 weapons have been decommissioned."<sup>3</sup>

I was reminded too of an Advent commentary by Paul Simpson Duke who described a parallel project in Missouri: "At St. Louis University is a small Jesuit chapel that is creatively lit. The light fixtures are made of twentieth-century cannon shells, converted. Emptied of their lethal contents, they now hold light for people to pray by. In such light we pray and live. And having laid our own weapons down, we bear witness to the promise of greater transformations in days to come."<sup>4</sup>

Much of the prophecy of Advent is of the God who enacts, who speaks the world and all manner of things into being and whose Word, in Christ, becomes flesh. I find often

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:34

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<sup>3</sup> <http://gloucester.anglican.org/news/press-releases/bullets-beaten-into-cross.php>

<sup>4</sup> Bartlett, David L.; Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1, Advent through Transfiguration* (Kindle Locations 424-427). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

the biggest challenge in Advent is achieving the necessary balance between watching and waiting and enacting. We need to remember that our calling is to be not just bearers of light but seekers of light. How can this be? Where might those unexpected sources of light be for us?

Most light in the natural world takes time to develop. When did you last take time to watch the sunrise and witness the journey from the first softening of the dark to full daylight? Where are those sources of light we may miss on first encounter? Who are the people in whom we see light?

We often talk of being Easter people, but I wonder if we've ever considered our role as Advent people? People who are seeking to work with God and each other in seeking and sharing the light, in partnering in the work God is already doing in our midst to heal and transform our world and its people?

Just as those who are blind or partially sighted have more keenly attuned hearing and touch and taste and smell, in a kind of parallel, when we dare to embrace the darkness, to slow down and contemplate, to be alert to the dark places in our midst, so we can develop and hone not our compassion and empathy. During Advent we can become more alert to how we can bear the light for others in the midst of their darkness. How can we shine a light to expose hatred and injustice? How can we befriend those who suffer?

One small but significant example is the new International Breakfast starting here next Saturday morning – a weekly drop in for refugees and those without recourse to public funds. It's new to us, but based on a successful model already established by our neighbours at St Martin in the Fields. There's also our Winter Night Shelter, which opens its doors again a week on Tuesday, and our FairTrade stall we'll be running in

our market in the weeks leading up to Christmas. All of these projects are practical ways of spreading light, one person at a time, of inviting others to walk and live in the light.

One of the things I love most and find most moving in this season are candlelit services in church after dark. I find something immensely powerful in being in a darkened church, and watching what begins as a single flame being shared along each pew until the whole building is illuminated by hundreds of candles. A natural sense of wonder spreads with each flame and we literally see one another differently, as we share in the awe of the moment. For me it is a metaphor of the power of the promise we celebrate this Advent that from one small light, there is the potential to change our world.

Despite the darkness of our world, the numerous significant political developments we've seen in recent months, despite the rise in hate crime and racism, despite the harrowing stories we heard from survivors in Bosnia, despite the desperate scenes we still see in Aleppo, I still believe in Advent. Noah didn't know how the future would unfold, but he held fast to God's promises and quietly got on and built the ark, in the face of much scepticism.

We don't know how or when God's promise will be fulfilled. No one knows. Nonetheless, we are called to play our part. Change, like light, can spread and grow, one person, one flame at a time. We are called not just to be the change we want to see in the world, or the peace we want to see in the world, or the hope we want to see in the world. In Advent we are called to be the light we want to see spread in the world. And so I close with a question. Not how can this be, but rather - do you believe in Advent?

Lindsay Meader