



27th December 2020

The First Sunday of Christmas and the Feast of St John the Evangelist

Sermon – St James's Piccadilly

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'The Impossible Has Already Happened'

*May I speak in the name of the Triune God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

About ten years ago, my students and I were discussing topics around health and wellbeing. The students in my A level Spanish class listened patiently as I told them that you used to be able to smoke everywhere, on the tube, on the top deck of the buses and on planes. I recounted a story of my mother having to argue for a non-smoking seat on a flight as my brother was asthmatic. In the middle of what I thought was my captivating storytelling, one of the voices of my students interrupted, "but Miss, how old are you?" I paused and replied, "this all obviously happened when dinosaurs roamed the earth". For them, because smoke-free public spaces was their norm, it was impossible for them to imagine otherwise.

Impossibility hangs around the Christmas story and our biblical passages today like smoke used to on your clothes and jackets after an outing before the smoking ban came into effect. Yet the message for us is plain and clear: the impossible has already happened. We are here on the threshold of 2021, with perhaps a deep eagerness to say goodbye to the catastrophe that has been 2020, and we are called to recognise that God stands within the impossibility of things and asks us to dare to imagine something different.

The Hebrew Bible reading for today comes from Exodus 33, in which we read that Moses pitched a tent outside the camp of the Ancient Israelites, on their exilic journey and met God there:

"When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and bow down, all of them, at the entrance of their tent. Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (Exodus 33. 9-11).

Face to face has felt like a luxury this year. We have been robbed of the simplicity of meeting for a coffee, having a shared meal, shaking and holding hands, hugging and embracing. And yet we are reminded in Psalm 117 "For great is his steadfast love towards us and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever". Given all that has happened this year, I wonder if you have felt God to be present, or absent, faithful or deeply fickle. All these feelings are right and legitimate in the face of our God who understands and whose presence and purpose may not necessarily match our feelings or desires.

The feast of Christmas which we have just celebrated in the most strained, challenge-filled and unusual ways, echoes the impossibility of God being face to face, in

the gurgling presence of the Christ-Child, being born through the body of a poor virgin, and surviving the massacre of innocents of a tyrannical leader. The simple fact of the matter is that Jesus should not have survived until the time he died. His mother had a precarious journey while pregnant with no accommodation planned, at a time both mother and baby were probably in grave danger. The baby is born without ancient midwifery, so is the story presented to us, and the child is worshipped and adored from its first breath. The impossible has already happened.

In the earlier part of chapter 21 of John's Gospel, Jesus appears to his disciples for the third time by the Sea of Tiberias. He asks them to meet him on the shore and shares a meal with them. He asks Peter if he loves him. As one scholar tells us, "the three questions and the three answers are formulated differently and lead to a climax where Peter feels personally hurt. In a certain sense he makes up for his three-fold denial in 18:15-27"¹ (Kieffer 2001: 999). The passage we hear today then follows this encounter and speaks of the permanence of the message of Jesus Christ written and recorded by the beloved disciple who some believe to the evangelist himself. We also hear of the foretelling of Peter's own death, also on the cross under another tyrant, at another time. Jesus who was crucified, dead and buried has been resurrected and now sits with old friends speaking of the challenge and call of the present moment and the promise of eternity. The impossible has already happened.

This year, for the first time since meeting my husband Ollie, he cut my hair. Lockdown necessity became the mother of invention. A Cheshire lad with no experience of cutting an afro, except for watching the National Theatre's fantastic production of the 'Barber Shop Chronicles' accepted the mission impossible with the sword of Damocles hanging over his blond locks. He survived, my hair survived, our marriage survived. The impossible has already happened. This year, for some of us, we also learnt the names of more of our neighbours, we broadened the reach of St James's Church, Piccadilly so friends could worship in real time with us from as near as Paris as far as Melbourne. The impossible has already happened. In the first lockdown in the Spring, the homeless communities in many cities and towns in the UK were provided for, with accommodation and meals and proper care. Suddenly there was room in the inn. The impossible has already happened. All those essential business meetings for which international flights and travel were a must were replaced by video calls. We now see that the impossible has already happened.

To say that something is impossible for a Christian simply doesn't work in the face of the reality of the incarnation. John's Epistle makes clear that the incarnation is a lived reality: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1 John 1). We do not know if this is the same John as the Gospel Writer, or another John or someone called Bob taking on the name of John, but the message clear. Jesus is not a theoretical conceptual person. He was real, he lived, *he is real and He is alive*. But we

¹ René Kieffer, 'John' in Barton, John and Muddiman John, *The Oxford Biblical Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.960-1000.

need to feel that and hold on to it, and wrap ourselves in the shroud of impossibility that wrapped his dying body and symbolises His risen life. What have we heard, what have we seen with our eyes, what have we looked at and touched with our hands in 2020 that affirm this reality, that the Word of Life, exists and breathes in the valley of the shadow of death that has been this unforgettable year? The impossible reality of a living Christ does not negate the suffering and all that we have had to endure this year. The impossible reality of a living Christ seeks to recognise our pain, our loss, to sit with us in the tent face-to-face and encourages us to listen and believe as Jesus says: I am here. I always have been, and I always will be.

The boldness of the Epistle writer in saying “This is the message we have heard from him [Jesus] and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all” may ring hollow this year. But it is helpful to remember that luminosity is God’s gait and identity. Light is God’s pattern of movement into which we are constantly and insistently called. God as light does not mean that everything becomes simplified, that we all have happy ends and un-pebbled and boulder-free paths. What we see, what we experience and what we live is held in a net of light. So our earthly experience of fragmentation and loss and tears is bound in light, even when we cannot see it or feel it. And even when the darkness threatens to overwhelm us.

And here we now, four days from the end of the year, having lived through 2020 with the sensory and cognitive awareness that the impossible has already happened. Writer Rebecca Solnit, in reflecting on global disasters and states “disasters begin

suddenly and never really end. The future will not, in crucial ways, be anything like the past, even the very recent past of a month or two ago. Our economy, our priorities, our perceptions will not be what they were at the outset of this year”.² Solnit also speaks of hope. She writes, “hope offers us clarity that, amid the uncertainty ahead, there will be conflicts worth joining and the possibility of winning some of them. And one of the things most dangerous to this hope is the lapse into believing that everything was fine before disaster struck, and that all we need to do is return to things as they were”. She continues, “ordinary life before the pandemic was already a catastrophe of desperation and exclusion for too many human beings, an environmental and climate catastrophe, an obscenity of inequality. It is too soon to know what will emerge from this emergency, but not too soon to start looking for chances to help decide it. It is, I believe, what many of us are preparing to do”.

Jesus’s appearance to the disciples on the Sea of Tiberias is not a friendly visit to chill-ax before returning to His heavenly place within the Trinity. Jesus sits and eats and talks with his friends face to face because he knows what is to come. He knows about the persecution and the suffering and the pain and He comes to remind them that the impossible has already happened. As we enter 2021, we hold on to the promise that God has already been here, in our flesh and blood and has lived this year with us. He has already died the martyrdom of Stephen which we commemorated yesterday and has experienced the death as an innocent man who had done no wrong, gross cruelty

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/07/what-coronavirus-can-teach-us-about-hope-rebecca-solnit>

and death which the Church recognised tomorrow as we remember the Holy Innocents. We crawl into a new calendar beginning with old assurances that God is light, God is true and the voice that says “follow me” is faithful, whatever befalls.

Amen.