

Jonathan Aitken Advent Sermon for December 2 2018
St Matthew's Westminster, 20 Great Peter Street

JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

ADVENT SUNDAY, December 2

ST. MATTHEW'S WESTMINSTER

Jeremiah 33: 14-16

Thessalonians 3: 9 to end

Luke 21: 29-36

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Before I first joined this congregation at St Matthew's 21 years ago I used to think that Advent was just another season of the Church -

although a rather jolly one with:

Pop up calendars at Sunday School;

Cheerful Carols like *Ding Dong Merrily on High*;

Mince pies for us choir boys;

While the grown-ups were given a glass of sherry with the Rector after Matins.

Some Church of England Parishes really used to be like that in my youth!

But after coming here and harkening to several of Fr Philip's inspirational Advent Sunday sermons which often came to a crescendo with a quote from Maria Boulding's great book *The Coming of God* I got the message.

Advent is the most subtle and challenging season. A time of holy waiting, of mystical murmurs, religious rustlings, strange spiritual signs -

and confusingly mixed messages.

The mixture of our readings today is unusually baffling even for Advent Sunday.

On the one hand we are told in our Reading from Luke to be ready for:

"signs in the stars"

"distress among nations",

"fear and foreboding" and that we will be "confused by roaring". Sounds uncannily like the Brexit debate!

But then we hear our Lord's voice moving us from the dimension of earthly time to the Kingdom of heavenly eternity when he says, "Heaven and Earth will pass away but my words will not pass away".

2,000 years later they have not passed away. And we are still living in troubled times in the shadow of eternity.

Our three readings between them paint a picture of momentous expectation, of unknowable future mysteries which highlight conflicting themes of fear and joy.

We can perhaps make sense of this conflict by going back to the first Advent and remembering that both fear and joy were present around Bethlehem as the people of Judea awaited the birth of the child destined to become the Saviour of the world.

Fear must have been lurking in many hearts for the people harshly ruled by the Roman occupation.

The harshness was aided and abetted by the puppet King Herod whose tyrannical violations of Human Rights were to include the beheading of John the Baptist and the slaughter of innocent babies.

More personally in an age when unmarried mothers were frequently stoned to death in the upcountry villages of Judea, Mary must have felt fear at the astounding news that she was pregnant.

You can almost hear the trembling of her voice when the Gospel records her initial response to Gabriel's message:

"How can this be seeing I know not a man?"

So there was a dark fearful side to the First Advent.

Perhaps there may be fearful sides in our personal Advents today as we grapple with our worries – such as family, medical or financial concerns. And particularly right now political worries.

Where are we going as a nation?

We might well ask, as Cabinets split, Governments totter, votes of confidence loom and the soundbites of 'project fear', and 'project hysteria' fill the airwaves.

Yet in our present season of anxious secular waiting we can learn much from the spiritual waiting in the first Advent.

Because on the positive side of those mixed messages there were abundant signs of joy.

"Rejoice" was the Angel's first words of greeting to Mary whose reaction to her annunciation in the Song of Praise known to us as the Magnificat was:

"My spirit rejoices in God My Saviour".

Then Mary's visit to Elizabeth in the Advent period made John leap for joy in his mother's womb.

Over the Manger in Bethlehem the Angels proclaimed "tidings of great joy" to the Shepherds.

In his early Ministry, Jesus himself "rejoiced in the Holy Spirit" telling his Disciples "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete".

These signs are strong reminders that a journey of faith with Jesus is a journey of joy.

But how then in our own lives should we bridge the gap between fear and joy?

There's a clue perhaps in our reading from Thessalonians when Paul, after referring to "all our distress and persecution" continues with this rhetorical question:

"How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?"

What the great Apostle may be getting at here is that by expressing our joyful gratitude to God we can defeat our human fears about our distress and worries.

Let me offer you a personal example of this.

Nine weeks ago I had a stroke.

As you can see I made a complete recovery.

I am back leading a full life which ranges from going out for runs three times a week to preaching sermons here, and to doing all my demanding prison chaplain duties at Pentonville. So I was lucky.

As a nurse in the A & E Wing rather charmingly put it after looking at my test results:

"Mr Aitken, you seem to have had your stroke in a part of your brain you don't use very much".

But even though my symptoms cleared up fast nevertheless on my long dark night of the stroke I had the inevitable moments of fear.

When you are transported off to the specialist Stroke Unit of the Charing Cross Hospital in an ambulance with its siren blazing and blue lights flashing and the paramedics tell you that you could have another stroke at any time it gets a bit scary.

And when you lie on a trolley in A & E Reception for four hours awaiting a bed with drama after drama happening around you and the screen above your trolley emitting its sinister and repetitive beeps as your blood pressure fluctuates you do feel afraid.

Faced with such fears, of course, I did a lot of praying.

But to my own surprise my principal prayers were not panicky requests for survival or recovery.

After a bit of that I went deeper and started to accept that whatever lay in store I wanted to thank God.

I wanted to thank him for what Englishmen like to call "a good innings", 76 years of interesting life, a happy marriage to Elizabeth, and the peace of God which I find is growing as I serve Him as one of his Deacons.

Several times over I repeated the wonderful General Thanksgiving from the Book of Common Prayer a part of which goes:

"We bless you for our creation, preservation,
and all the blessings of this life;
but above all for your inestimable love
in the redemption of the world
by our Lord Jesus Christ,
for the means of grace and for the hope of glory."

These prayers of gratitude to God, not only seemed to come naturally. They completely calmed me down and filled me with joy.

And to make my joy complete Elizabeth arrived, propelling herself into the Stroke Unit ward on her sticks at three times the speed with which you see her tottering into St Matthew's.

Then there was a good moment when a heavily bandaged fellow patient spotted my dog collar.

So he rushed over to me and implored, "Bless Me Father".

For a fleeting moment I wondered if I should explain to him that under Subsection of B 12 of the C & E Rules Deacons are not supposed to give blessings.

But hoping that I would be forgiven, I ignored the rule and gave this severely injured man a full blessing – which seemed to make both of us feel better.

Why am I telling you all this on Advent Sunday?

To try to illustrate that the Advent conflict of fear and joy can be alive in us today just as strongly as it was when Luke's gospel was written.

Indeed if you study the passage that we read this morning, it initially sounds as though Jesus was trying as they say in Pentonville "to put the frighteners" on his listeners.

In the historical short term he was proved right. The Roman Empire in the years AD 60-70, after Nero's suicide, went through five emperors in ten years with political convulsions that shook the known world to its foundations and ended the age of the Pax Romana.

I don't think the convulsions and the constitutional crisis that Brexit or no Brexit may create are in the same league.

Nevertheless, Jesus's dire warnings are as valid in the 21st century as they were in the 1st century.

This is because Jesus so clearly tells us what to do spiritually when the secular world around us seems to be falling apart.

'Be on guard for the unexpected', is his command to his followers:
'Pray for strength', 'stand up and raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near'.

As we wait on events in this season of Advent, let us intensify the steady disciplined tread of prayer, hope, thanksgiving, witness and obedience.

They were the cornerstones of the first Advent. May they be our cornerstones this Advent.

Amen.