

# Sunday 9 December 2007: The Second Sunday of Advent

## Waiting for the invasion of holiness

### Readings: Isaiah 11: 1-10, Matthew 3: 1-12

After the launch session recently of 'Justthisday' – the initiative to join people of all faiths and none around the globe in a time of stillness in a troubled world – there was a gathering in the crypt for the representatives of many faiths and denominations who had come to St Martin's to show solidarity with the idea. The Bishop of Reading, who got a lot of publicity recently for handing out egg-timers on Reading station in his bid to encourage people to switch off for a moment was there, there were Buddhists, Bahai's, Jews and Muslims and people from all sorts of meditation groups as well as representatives of various Christian denominations. Surely something was at work.

I met a representative of an interfaith organisation working with Jews, Muslims and Christians and he told me how he came to be involved in inter-faith work. More than 20 years ago he and his wife – both Jewish – were on a cruise in the West Indies. They met a couple, much younger than them, who were rather unusually dressed for that context. It turned out they were getting married on one of the islands and it also emerged that they were Christians.

The four of them got on well and gradually got to know each other, to the point where the younger man felt emboldened to ask him when he had converted to Judaism. Later, reflecting on this, he realised that his travelling companion lived in a part of the country where very few Jewish people lived so the likelihood was that he had never met a Jew before. In his innocence he had assumed that anyone who is Jewish must be a covert from Christianity. That may sound naive but it's true.

The friendship was cemented and continues to this day and, when the couple had their first child, they asked their Jewish friend to be a god-father. He spoke to their vicar and explained that he couldn't undertake to see that the child grew up in the Christian faith but that he could promise to do what he could to see that he grew up as a person of God and as a good person. That was the start of his inter-faith work which has gone on ever since.

He is a lawyer and he's recently been asked, by a newly formed Muslim umbrella organisation, to give them advice on governance procedures - something that, even very recently, would have seemed unthinkable. If we think about the question of who or what points us to God this Advent that might be one example.

Or there was that terrific presentation by the team from St Ethelberga's in the Education series with the insight that Christian reconciliation isn't about patching up something old but rather the formation of something new.

'A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him'. What a lovely image that is. The Spirit of the Lord resting on a person. How gentle and how beautiful. Perhaps we don't always associate the Hebrew scriptures with gentleness but there it is. And if we think of the qualities of the Spirit our minds may turn more readily to the Epistles but here they are – in Isaiah.

‘The Spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord’.

What is it that shapes our lives? The novelist Frederick Buechner suggests that what we’re waiting for in Advent is an invasion of holiness. Both the Isaiah passage and the gospel introducing us to the adult John the Baptist contain a longing for the coming of the holiness of God. But that longing is very different in its expression, in ways that might - at one level - seem unexpected.

Someone once described the difference between baseball and American football in this way. Baseball, he said, is peaceful while American football is military. Baseball is played in a field and football on a gridiron. The aim of baseball is to go home while that of football is to get into the End Zone. In baseball you can make a sacrifice. In football you throw the bomb.

We’re presented with two visions of the coming of the holiness of God. Isaiah speaks of the coming of the servant of God who will bring in the new kingdom of God’s holiness on earth, the peaceable kingdom where the most unlikely couplings, wolf with lamb, calf with lion, will live peaceably together. Matthew also speaks of the one who is to come bringing in the holiness of God but this time it will be with cutting, chopping, fire and judgement.

Isaiah, in this passage, is surely the baseball player. His images begin to reflect a new power of life. The old, dead wood, begins to send out new shoots. He looks towards a time when the seemingly impossible - the child in safety with the snake or the wolf with the lamb - become possible with God. A time when the whole of creation lives in peace together. It may sound naive but it is a necessary reminder for us not to give up hope, not to despair, not to give up striving. What is it that shapes our lives and what may be pointing us to God?

And then John – surely the American football player shaped by a different vision of the coming of holiness. When we really think about John and put aside the romantic wilderness image it’s quite a hard vision to swallow really. For John, when the holiness comes in its great glory, the consequence will be the punishment of destruction and evil. This is a vision of the coming of holiness akin to Michelangelo’s ‘Last Judgement’ in which we see the herding of human beings into the pit of everlasting fire. This is why judgement was always one of the traditional themes of Advent though now it has become a bit taboo perhaps, but it’s there strongly in the person of John.

The coming of holiness will be a sudden, decisive moment in John’s eyes. There’ll be winnowing and sorting out with the unworthy being chopped down and cast into a fire. There’s even a hint that John might have felt a sense of regret that those who came and heard his words might then repent and be excused from judgement. It can feel quite hard to get it right with John. What is it that shapes our lives and what is it that points us to God?

A group of American Christians went on a mission trip to South America. They’d been prepared for the conditions they’d be working in but no amount of class-room instruction could really ready them for the actuality of what they found. Children dying every day. Hunger. Political oppression and cruelty. Within a few days they’d lost all their enthusiasm for trying to help. What was the point? Anything they did would be destroyed by the next day.

A local Christian from the community they were working with spoke to them. 'You Americans' he said (and I repeat this with apologies to any Americans in the congregation this morning but this is a story told by an American) 'you only know how to think about things in terms of winning. You always want to think about being able to say how much good you did. So you look at our lives and don't know how to carry on. And yet, when you look into our faces, you're amazed to see the faces of hope. Hope, not because we're winning, we've been losing all our lives. These are our children we're burying. Our necks that live with the heavy boot of oppression, our bodies that go hungry but when you look into our faces you see the face of hope.

We're hopeful not because we can do anything. We're hopeful because we're convinced that we're trying to be faithful to what God is inviting us to do in the situation where we are, and because of that we have hope that when the victory comes, it will be ours. It may come tomorrow. It may come in 300 years. But when it comes it will be ours and we will be his.'

What is it that shapes our lives and points us on while we wait for the invasion of holiness?