

Get happy

Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent, 1st December 2024

Readings [1 Thessalonians 3:9-13](#), [Luke 21.25-36](#)

‘The impact is powerful, like a meteorite falling.’

Not an apocalyptic verse from the Bible, but [Vladimir Putin on TV](#), threatening Kyiv with a new missile he claims to have. It illustrates one of the reasons why our spook in chief Richard Moore, head of MI6, said in a [speech in Paris](#) last Friday, ‘In 37 years in the intelligence profession, I’ve never seen the world in a more dangerous state.’ He namechecked Russia, also China, North Korea and Iran. The next day, Lord Ricketts, former National Security Adviser, agreed, and added to the list ‘the looming catastrophe of climate change’.

I say this not to terrify you before lunch but to show that when Luke describes Jesus talking about

‘signs in the sun, moon, and stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves,’

he is speaking to our condition. Those words probably refer to the destruction of the city of Jerusalem in AD70 amid convulsions in the Roman world, but it’s a world we recognise. Uncomfortably familiar.

And how should we respond? Keep an eye on events, says Jesus, the way you watch the sprouting leaves on the trees for the turning of the season. And if you’re tempted to say, ‘Oh, it’s all *too* depressing to think about, and I’ve got worries of my own, let’s just try and have a good time while we can,’ to you Jesus says: stay alert; don’t let events catch you like a trap. If last Thursday brought global warnings, Friday brought that most intimate of questions: how should we act with compassion towards people in pain and close to death?

Like me, you will each have your own view about the way the first vote went on the Assisted Dying Bill. Some of the earlier debate had been unpleasant but on the day it wasn’t. Hard-bitten Westminster observers said this was the House of Commons as they had rarely seen it: speeches made with passion and heard with courtesy; and when the result was declared – silence. What did the silence say? According to a [BBC correspondent](#), some said it ‘reflected the dignity and maturity’ of the debate, while another said, ‘It felt like a collective sense of “what have we just done?”’

Those Thursday and Friday speeches, one in a British embassy and the others in the British Parliament, set out the full spectrum of human experience: we are carried on the tide of the world’s events, yet within the roaring sea and the waves there are still choices we must make that do actually mean something – and we are accountable for the decisions we take. The 605 MPs who voted (and those who didn’t) will have been keenly aware of that. And that same public-personal spectrum underlies Jesus’ words: there are things happening in the world you can’t direct, but you bear the responsibility of how you respond to them – so be on guard.

Today we begin Advent, this three-and-a-half-week season leading up to Christmas that draws together the public and the personal, the cosmic and the intimate. The Advent scripture readings, and the wonderful music of the season, have a yearning quality to them. They give voice to our longings for things to be fulfilled, set to rights, in our world and in our lives.

The controlling image of Advent is that of light coming into darkness; and the urgency of the season, with its countdown to Christmas, reminds us that time is limited, precious; too precious to be squandered on false living (what today's collect calls 'the works of darkness'), because this gift of life on earth does not last for ever, and in the end we are accountable for it to God.

Now you may say this all makes sober sense, but it doesn't exactly sound fun, and aren't we supposed to be approaching the season of good cheer? Yet today's reading from St Paul is full of joy, and many people have found a reason to be cheerful in this season.

Years ago, I was in a department store around Christmastime, and coming out of a display screen in the cosmetics department was a song that has stayed with me:

Forget your troubles, c'mon get happy,
you better chase all your cares away.
Shout hallelujah, c'mon get happy,
get ready for the judgement day.

It was in an advert for Happy, the woman's fragrance from Clinique (currently 25% off for Black Friday, which lasts until Tuesday), but the words were from a song made famous by [Judy Garland in 1950](#), and written in the 1920s. Lyricist Ted Koehler heard the tune, in his mind it fused with the words 'get happy', a phrase he knew from African American spirituals that described receiving the Holy Spirit, and out came the song. In it, he drew on a common theme in spirituals that judgement day would indeed be a day of joy.

The world of spirituals is rooted in the experience of slavery and, after that, the denial of civil rights. Now if that is your state, the day of judgement will indeed be a day to get happy, for that will be the day when what Jesus calls your 'redemption', your liberation, is 'drawing near'.

Yet the judgment is not only for them – the bad people who deny your rights – but about you; and being a victim doesn't make you perfect. Shouldn't you also have something to fear as you get ready for the judgement day?

Our Gospel reading is full of fear; but, says Jesus, 'you' – that is, us, the ones who listen to his voice – you mustn't cower, but lift up your heads. How does that work? None of us is perfect either. If a day of reckoning is to come, we each have our secrets: the betrayals (small or large), the failures to love, or to care, or just to be bothered. Why should we not fear to 'stand before the Son of Man' – that is, before Jesus our judge? How can we hold our heads high? Because we have heard the voice of the Son of Man.

Today we begin a year in the company of Luke, who will supply the gospel readings for most Sundays over the next 12 months. And as the year unfolds we shall hear the words that Luke gives us that carry the voice of Jesus:

'The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor';
'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh';
'Give and it will be given to you in good measure'.

We shall hear Jesus' story of the prodigal son (only in Luke's gospel); his words to his disciples,

'Fear not, little flock',
and to his executioners,
'Father, forgive them'.

As Jesus says today, these are words that, 'shall never pass away', and they tell us that his judgment, 'when he shall come again in his glorious majesty' (today's collect again), that awful telling of the truth about us, will be the act of a friend. They tell us that those eyes which will look us through at the last, those eyes which – how terrifying! – will see everything, will be the eyes of love.

To be seen truthfully for all that I am and to be *loved*; the day that happened would indeed be a day to get happy. And, if you want it, that day can be today.

Almighty God,
give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness
and put upon us the armour of light,
now in the time of this mortal life,
in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility;
that in the last day
when he shall come again in his glorious majesty
to judge both the quick and the dead,
we may rise to the life immortal;
through him who liveth and reigneth
with thee and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever.

Collect for Advent Sunday

Notes

Lord Ricketts BBC Radio 4 [Today, Saturday 30 November](#) (53:00)

The voice of the Son of Man

The Spirit of the Lord: Luke 4:18

Blessed are you who weep: Luke 6:21

Prodigal son: Luke 15:11-32

Fear not, little flock: Luke 12.32

Father, forgive them: Luke 23.34