

First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 2:1-5, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44

“What can you use a paperclip for?”

This question was asked of me one day a few years ago, during a supervision session with my mentor at Devon County Council. This was before my perusal of a ministerial calling, and I think my line-manager had rather hoped that giving me a mentor would aid me in my illustrious career in Local Government. I had just told my mentor that I sometimes find it hard to think creatively about a situation, when he came up with this question about paperclips. Now, I rather thought I had misheard his question “did you say, what do I use a paperclip for?” I asked, bewildered. He nodded. I said, “I use it for clipping paper together.” “Well then,” he said, “to help you think creatively, over the next week I would like you to think of 50 more uses for a paperclip other than clipping paper together.”

Now, there’s a challenge for you! I’ll come back to paperclips later.

One of the major themes of the season of advent is the simple phrase – “wake up!” which is rendered in various ways through today’s readings. In our reading from Romans, Paul says “wake up... for the night is far gone, the day is near.” Our gospel reading speaks of the owner of the house staying awake for the thief. I don’t know about you, but I find much of today’s gospel reading a bit alarming. Particularly that bit about the two in the field, one will be taken, one left, and the two women grinding meal, one will be taken, one left. Depending on the way we read the Bible, we may take this all very literally, or we may see this imagery as a bit of a mini-parable. But, to be honest, however we read it, the message is the same, and it’s no less alarming. Be awake, be attentive to the Lord. Jesus is verbally

grabbing us by the shoulders and giving us a bit of a shake, a virtual alarm clock – come on, he says, wake up.

Today, the first day of advent, is, of course, the first day of the Church year, and the season of advent has something of the vibe of the new year about it. I don't know about you, but come January, when I emerge from the Toblerone-induced fug of Christmas, I am often in the mood to give myself a bit of a shake. I am one for new year's resolutions. I make loads of them. Tidy the house, eat better, spend less time on Facebook, that sort of thing. Sometimes they even last until February. I wonder, maybe the beginning of advent, the Church's new year, should prompt a similar reaction. A time for spiritual new year's resolutions. To recommit to being awake to God's presence. To reflect on the unhelpful rhythms and routines we follow, and commit to change. To stop ourselves in our tracks and get ourselves spiritually ready for what is to come - that baby in a manger, that event which stops the world in its tracks.

This morning's wonderful Isaiah reading is about exactly that, people stopping themselves in their tracks and committing themselves to change. It's one of my very favourite passages in Isaiah. It is about stepping up, out of the valleys of our lives and climbing up to the highest mountain where we may be taught by the Lord. And up on the mountain we can see the old paths we walked in, and we can learn to walk in new paths, enlivened and enlightened by God.

“What else can you use a paperclip for?” You can use the sharp end to press a reset button on an electronic device. You can link a few paperclips together and make a plumb line, or a washing line, or an unfashionable bracelet. You could get hold of several hundred of them and build a little Eiffel tower. You can conduct electricity with a paperclip. You can uncurl a single paperclip and curl it up again as a ring, or a spring, or a pair of glasses for action man. It all becomes possible if we see the everyday item in a new way.

What else can you use a sword for? Or a spear? (Asks Isaiah). You can beat your sword into a ploughshare, and your spear into a pruning hook. These items too can be seen in a different way, can be reinvented. Sharp tools needn't be used for violence and destruction, for bringing down other nations and destroying lives. Sharp tools may be used for good. For food, and livelihood. For prosperity, not only for yourself but for others. For harvesting what is good and leaving behind what is bad, literally and spiritually.

What else can you use your life for? For if such material things as paperclips and swords can be seen in new ways, how much more so can our lives. Do we always use the moments we have, the opportunities we are given, our resources and relationships in the best way? Do we always see God in each situation we encounter, each person we encounter? Are we sometimes tempted to live our lives heads-down and eyes closed, following comfortable rhythms and routines. I know I often am.

The message of advent – wake up, lift up your heads. The light is coming. Let us watch for it.

Amen.