

ADVENT SUNDAY 2017 Yr B

St David's Eucharist

When I was first a curate we lived in Tavistock, a lovely market town in West Devon with a large and beautiful medieval parish church in whose grounds lie the remains of a Benedictine abbey. One of the many pluses of being there was being part of a vibrant church in the heart of a lively community. It was sufficiently far from Plymouth to have a life of its own and there was no other Anglican church in the town. So after a while both Ruth and I became very immersed in the life of the place.

Another plus was being on the edge of Dartmoor. We could walk out of our house and at the top of the road go through a wicket gate which led directly onto a common which eventually seamlessly became the lower reaches of the moor. One day we went up onto the moor for a walk from where you had a marvellous view of the town nestled below.

As we looked down we said: 'There's the centre of the universe!' And laughed. But there was a sense in which for us it had become so. We knew people who lived there, the work they did and some of their hopes and concerns.

But up there, on the moor, we could see the place in its wider setting, the church still visible, but surrounded by many other buildings, and eventually fields and then Bodmin Moor rising in the far distance on the other side of the Tamar out to the West.

It was a bit like the experience of looking these days at Googlemaps on your phone or computer where you can press a button and the view pans out from the street to the town and then to the region and out to the country itself.

Advent is the Biblical equivalent of all of that. The Christian Year begins again today and all of a sudden it's as if we've been sent up into space and given a bigger, broader perspective of our lives. We're invited to see them in the much longer perspective of God's time, the perspective of the one who creates mountains and seas and the vast forces of nature; the one who darkens the sun and moon and shakes the stars from their place.

Even more than Mark, whose Gospel we begin reading liturgically again this year, we catch that sense of amazement at the universe in the writing of Isaiah:

‘When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you who works for those who wait for him.’

One of the reasons it’s important to read and understand the Hebrew scriptures is the perspective they give us on the breadth of God’s dealings with his human creation. Only one Gospel gives a hint of the same long view, John, whose writing begins, in a deliberate echo of the Hebrew Bible, at the beginning. ‘In the beginning there was the Word...’ ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...’

At the beginning of December there was Christmas shopping. The lights were switched on – actually they didn’t even wait until December – M&S, John Lewis and the rest trumpeted their Christmas adverts. Come, and buy into the frenetic rush of presents and the atmosphere of fake Christmas cheer, they said. Here is John Betjeman writing in his poem *Advent 1955*:

And how, in fact, do we prepare
The great day that waits us there -
For the twenty-fifth day of December,
The birth of Christ? For some it means
An interchange of hunting scenes
On coloured cards, And I remember
Last year I sent out twenty yards,
Laid end to end, of Christmas cards
To people that I scarcely know -
They'd sent a card to me, and so
I had to send one back. Oh dear!
Is this a form of Christmas cheer?
Or is it, which is less surprising,
My pride gone in for advertising?

Advent Sunday reminds us of greater things than our own immediate concerns, it opens a window onto the vastness of creation, and the power of God who created it.

This is important for us because it reminds us that the universe does not just revolve around us and our concerns. Brexit and Islamism and the vagaries of Trump's America and all the 'big issues' which fill both news and social media, all those personal issues which so readily fill our waking and sometimes even our sleeping lives, all momentarily recede into the background in comparison with the awesomeness and majesty of God.

That's not to deny their importance or the need to be concerned about them, but simply to put them in the perspective of eternity. Advent invites us to think about our lives and what's important in them in the light of God's eternal purpose for the whole of his creation. It also invites us to place our trust in the one who has not only created all of this but who yet is our Father.

'When I consider your heavens and the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have ordained, what are mortals, that you should be mindful of them; mere human beings, that you should seek them out?'

says the writer of Psalm 8.

This is the paradox of God's love for us, the paradox that we experience every time we look out into a clear night sky. What I can see is so amazing I can't take it in, and yet my life feels significant even set against such vastness. This is the paradox affirmed by our faith. God is not only mindful of us he has a purpose for our lives. The details matter because they both shape and reflect who we are and what is important for us.

In our headlong rush to commercial Christmas, Advent speaks to us of important things, of bigger things that have been the constant objects of our fascinated thoughts and questions as a human race for thousands of years: our place in the pattern of creation, our purpose, our end and the End of all things.

Faith gives us the framework, if not to understand, at least to begin to get some kind of handle on what the answers to such questions might be. For us as Christians we believe that God's infinity and majesty are to be found in the person of Christ. And Christ is to be seen in the paradox of a particular human life, lived in a real place at a certain time in human history: the life of Jesus from Nazareth. In him mortality and immortality are to be found in a way that illuminates our own mortality and our longing to reach out beyond it.

It even illuminates, I think, why the story of a young prince and an American actress has the power to reach beyond the two main players. Nothing could be more specific, more particular and yet more universal. ‘She just tripped and fell into my life and I into hers.’ At a particular time and in a certain place. But because it’s about love, it’s a story that reaches beyond the two people who for the moment embody it. In a dark and troubled world it brings a smile to the lips of all but the most deeply cynical. For love embodies trust and holds out hope whenever you meet it. Faith, hope and love, these three, will take us beyond ourselves and the minute particulars of our lives and into eternity. They take us into the one – Jesus Christ – who is the ‘beyond in our midst’, as Bonhoeffer puts it. So, in the words of Betjeman’s poem again:

'The time draws near the birth of Christ'.
A present that cannot be priced
Given two thousand years ago
Yet if God had not given so
He still would be a distant stranger
And not the Baby in the manger.