

An Address by Nigel Guthrie, 29 November 2020 – Advent Sunday

I look from afar: and lo, I see the power of God coming, and a cloud covering the whole earth.

Those evocative words are often sung by church choirs at the beginning of Advent as part of a Matin Responsory. They pick up on the theme of watching for the coming of Christ which is the central focus of Advent. We are preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas but at the same time looking forward to his coming in glory and judgement at the end of time.

Throughout the bible clouds are a symbol of the glory of God, a sign of God's presence amongst people. It was a pillar of cloud that led the ancient Hebrew people by day on their journeys through the wilderness. And in the life of Jesus, he is hidden in a cloud at his transfiguration and then is taken up into the clouds at his ascension. In this morning's gospel we hear how his second coming in power and glory will also be 'in clouds'.

But the thing about clouds is that they obscure what is behind them. We don't always appreciate them when we are trying to enjoy some winter sun and top up our vitamin D! But they also bless the earth when they release their moisture as rain. So when clouds are used as a symbol of God's presence they remind us that in this world God can't be seen directly, but only with the eye of faith. What do we see when we 'look from afar'? I wonder if we see the power of God being revealed, because we should be looking for it and rejoicing in it even amongst the clouds.

I've been reflecting on the election in the United States this week. It's been a massively expensive and divisive election. And yet that tortuous process did achieve the biggest voter turn out in history which must be good for democracy in that country. And whatever our political views it has to be good news that the incoming president is firmly committed to being part of the Paris Climate Agreement. And even the individuals elected can give reasons for hope. Joe Biden is the oldest ever President elect. But isn't that good news for those of us who are getting on a bit - showing that we can still be useful! And Kamala Harris has broken a glass ceiling for women in becoming the first female vice president elect as well as the first black and Asian American in the office showing that these groups can be represented at the highest levels of Government. Amongst the clouds of division there are signs of hope and positive change.

And in our own nation where the dark clouds of Covid are at last being lightened by the promise of effective vaccinations, the pandemic has also brought unexpected good things in its wake. Many people record an enhanced appreciation of nature and

green spaces and perhaps this will sharpen our commitment towards tackling climate change. Some are benefitting from spending less time commuting to work. Applications for nursing training have risen significantly, which is good news as I believe that there are more than 40,000 unfilled nursing vacancies across the country! (Although for all the praise that has been heaped on the profession, the long shifts required of many nurses still lead to many leaving the profession early.) Even in this destructive and testing crisis God has been at work bringing good things to pass. *I look from afar: and lo, I see the power of God coming, and a cloud covering the whole earth.*

But even the people who met Jesus in person didn't always recognise the glory of God in him. Yet some definitely did! Indeed in his birth and baptism, his miracles and teaching and in his death and resurrection there were many who saw the power and glory of God in Jesus. His life revealed and yet also, to some extent, concealed the glory of his Father. His earthly body was rather like a cloud. God was present in it yet God could not be seen directly through it.

And St Paul was aware of a similar paradox in his own life. His unspecified 'thorn in the flesh' gave him great anguish and he received a word from the Lord about it: *'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12: 9-10)*

As we approach our celebrations of God made flesh in a vulnerable child it is good to reflect that it's in our weaknesses as well as our strengths that God can work. Our weaknesses can make us more sympathetic to others who have similar struggles but nevertheless most of us would rather feel strong and capable. But feeling otherwise; feeling vulnerable, fearful or in pain doesn't prevent **us** from knowing God's presence with us or prevent **God** from working in and through us. After all, as Isaiah reminds us, we are the clay from which God the potter has fashioned us for his service. Our lives might not dazzle others with the glory of God every day, but our love and service, our constancy and kindness, our desire for justice and courage in the face of bullying will point towards the love of God we know in Jesus.

So when we see clouds ahead for our world, or for our own lives, let's not fail to search for the glory they can reveal.

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Blessing of the Gifts for Moldova

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the provision you make for our lives and for these shoeboxes that have been prepared with love for people we will never see. We pray that they may bring comfort and joy to those who will receive them and help those, young and old who live in poverty in Moldova. We dedicate them now with thanksgiving in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.