

dare to dream
a sermon preached on
advent sunday
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at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
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the lections: Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80; 1 Corinthians 1: 1-9; Mark 13: 24-37.

‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down’ (Is. 64.1). This is a cry of anguished hope – Israel is close to despair. They have been torn from their homes – their temple is ruined. They feel like withered leaves blown about all over the place – they complain to the Lord: ‘You have hidden your face from us’. But rather than giving away to despair, there comes a cry of desperate longing. ‘Oh that you would tear down the heavens and come down.’

The scriptures are full of this kind of experience. When life seems to mock our hopes something in Israel’s faith cries out that this is not a natural state of affairs. That something better than this is surely to be dreamed of. The psalm writer aches with pain of it: ‘As the hart pants for the water brook so thirsts my soul for you O God.’ Paul grappled with the roots of it and wrote, ‘for all creation is groaning in travail together until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves, we groan inwardly as we wait.’ There is a desperate longing for something better. ‘How long O Lord, how long?’

At this time of the year all of this speaks to us with great power, as one liturgical year ends and another begins as one calendar year concludes we look forward to the New Year and at the same time as looking forward we are also looking back often reflecting on the sad history of the conflicts and chaos of humanity in centuries past but we only need to look back at the 20th century to observe the most murderous period in human history. In the hopelessness of the Palestinian refugee camps or the relatives of the victims blown up by suicide bombers in many of our cities, or the ongoing human cost in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, The Sudan and parts of Africa all seem to indicate that the present century is going to outstrip the past. There is the ongoing tension across the world caused by terrorism and the development of nuclear weapons in India Pakistan & North Korea. There is the eco-system being damaged, there is racial and gender conflict with associated prejudice. At the root of much of this are the bleak realities of inequality, violence and hunger. Half the people on earth live on less than \$2 a day. Huge numbers of people go to bed hungry every night, and hardly ever have a glass of clean water to drink. Millions are sick with HIV-AIDS and the number keeps increasing especially in the developing world – and we are constantly being warned about a variety of possible epidemics on the horizon.

How do we react to a world like this? One response might be to say: well this is the way things are. Let us just accept it and get whatever enjoyment we can while we can. A playwright was one asked what he wanted out of life. His reply was ‘to get as much pleasure as possible before he was dead’.

But religious faith cannot rest with that. If there is a God of Justice, surely faith cries that this not how the world is meant to be? It cannot just stay like this. ‘Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down.’

So Israel in her desperation dared to dream of something that was not yet. How it would come they were not clear. When it would come they were not clear. But the contrast between God and the present was such that they could not accept that things would stay simply as they were. So they dreamed of a time when swords would be beaten into ploughshares, and spears into pruning hooks, and nation would not lift up sword against nation nor learn war any more. For a transformation so that ‘no more shall there be...an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person that does not live out a lifetime.’ The cynic might say that since this seems so far away as ever the dream was a foolish one. But it was a not-yet dream for which they could live. It gave dignity and purpose and sometimes the hope that influenced reality.

It seems that Jesus, too, lived with this hope of transformation. The gospel reading on this first Sunday of Advent is one of those strange eschatological texts that seem to be predicting the future. The end is near. The power of God will dissolve the status quo; shake the foundations of the earth and usher in the end time. The Son of Man will come with power and glory.

It is hard to take the eschatological texts seriously in the modern world. We tend to leave them to the sects and smile when their constant predictions are equally constantly wrong. From the evidence of the New Testament when the early church attempted predictions on the basis of them they were equally always wrong so you might have thought that we would have learned by now. But the heart of these texts is not so hard to understand as we imagine. When we ask ‘What on earth does this mean?’ that as George Caird used to remind us, is exactly the right question. It is about a vision of a changed world where God’s will is done on earth, as it is in heaven. It is about looking forward to something better. A day when the poor will have bread, the tears will cease, and God will be all in all.

The Christian is not content with things as they are. No! ‘Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down.’ We belong to something that is not-yet – that is coming to be. We are a pilgrim people, on the way to a Kingdom that is always ahead of us, beckoning. No more today than in the past are these hopes simply fulfilled. Famously Martin Luther King at the end of the March on Washington in 1963 spelled out his dream of unity between black and white:

I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will be judged not by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today – that one day down in Alabama little black boys and girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today that freedom will reign.

Some have said that because of the election nine years ago of a black President in the USA that this dream was being fulfilled but there is a not-yet quality to it. The dream makes people restless with injustice and the world is better for it. Desmond Tutu dreamt of a South Africa as a rainbow nation and the dream challenges and inspires.

Today at the beginning of Advent, at the beginning of a new church year, we remind ourselves that faith is always about being unsettled with how things are and longing for how they are to be. We look towards a dream. Meanwhile we are in a state of not-yet-ness of God’s creation. We are in the not-yet-ness of justice, the not-yet-ness of peace in the Middle East, the not yet-ness of a cure for cancer, the not yet-ness of an end to poverty, racism and hunger. Some of us are in the middle of our own ‘not-yet-ness’ as we move through difficult life experiences in which the answers are not readily available or apparent-not yet. Our church is in the middle of a ‘not-yet-ness’ as we seek the key to bring a message of salvation in a society that has become affluent and lazy about eternal truth and values.

But we dare to dream, we dare to hope, we dare to go on believing. ‘Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down.’