

maranatha!

a sermon preached on

Advent Sunday

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:9-14; Matthew 24:36-44

Maranatha! Come Lord! This is our *Adventus* prayer. With the turning of a new liturgical year; in the convulsing of a world in birth-pangs, in all its shocking and appalling violence and cruelty and political upheavals; in our own personal and communal disturbances and threats; indeed our hearts cry out with all those who Jesus promised ‘would not die before all these things have taken place’¹: *Maranatha!* Come Lord!

For our hearts do long for the coming of the Human One.² That is to say, we do long for the completeness, the one-ness, the peace, the wholeness, the reconciliation, the creative unity-in-diversity which is the gospel’s promise, and for which we were made.

Our hearts are indeed restless – in spite of the smooth outward appearances we have spent lifetimes cultivating – and their restlessness cannot be satisfied with the superficial which we try so hard to substitute for the real. As St Augustine so astutely observed: our heart’s restlessness can only find its rest in the Real, in the Ultimate Truth, in the Ground of All Being, in the coming of the Human One.

However, in the days before ‘the flood’ we are ‘eating and drinking, marrying and being given in marriage’³ – that is to say, confusing surface for depth – and therefore ‘know nothing until the flood comes and sweeps us away’.⁴ And when this happens to us we are truly shocked.

Why are we so surprised by the events of the outer world? And why are we so shocked? Partly because we fail to take account of the inner world. The tragedy of so much religion is that, stuck in concrete literalism, and at the surface, it is both incapable of entering the kingdom itself, and, worse still, prevents others from entering.⁵ It is truly like Noah’s neighbours who ‘knew nothing’.⁶

For the kingdom is fundamentally an *inner* reality; which has outer consequences. Swords are beaten into ploughshares *as the fruit of going up to the mountain of the Lord*.⁷ When we get this equation the wrong way around, the results are catastrophic; the superficial illegitimately laying claim to what it can never own.

I recently watched the movie ‘The Man Who Saw Infinity’. It’s about the life of an extraordinary uneducated poor peasant from Madras, Ramanujan; who, about 100 years ago, proved to be a mathematical genius. I mention Ramanujan because when questioned by the Cambridge University mathematician elite as to how he came to his astonishing mathematical insights, he claimed that God gave them to him. That is to say, mathematical truths are, first and foremost inner realities, which can be observed exteriorly.

Advent is the liturgical year’s gift to us to re-ground in the inner reality. ‘IT’ people advise us that all computers should be regularly switched off in order to be re-booted, in order to clear out the junk that can hamper the computer’s optimum performance. It’s odd that we so readily take their advice about a mere machine; but do not take equally seriously the need to do so with regard to our inner lives, obviously of infinitely greater value.

But every year on Advent Sunday the Scriptures remind us of the need to re-boot; to wake up to the ways in which, like Noah’s neighbours, we have become preoccupied with outer things, have allowed the superficial to run our lives. “Now is the time to wake from sleep”.⁸ “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. You also must be ready, for the Human One is coming at an unexpected hour.”⁹

How does this ‘coming’ happen? Generally speaking, shockingly. (Just take a look at the prophetic literature and the gospels!) Because slumber, unconsciousness and superficiality can usually only be

1 Matthew 24:34

2 Matthew 24:39b

3 Matthew 24:38

4 Matthew 39:a

5 Matthew 23:13-15

6 Matthew 24:39

7 Isaiah 2:3-4

8 Romans 13:11

9 Matthew 24:42,44

dislodged by something shocking. Commentary pouring out of America right now – and indeed from around the Western world – is laden with the language of shock.

But when we keep whatever surface events there might be breaking out in proper perspective – that is to say, when we remember that the evolution of human consciousness is an inner quest – then we can hear again the liberating truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that in this shocking ‘coming’, ‘salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers’.¹⁰

“When the Human One does come – that is, when inner reality does break out into consciousness – it brings with it a reorganization of the personality so violent and so complete that it can only be described in apocalyptic images”.¹¹ “For at that time there will be great suffering... For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens to lead astray... For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Human One... Immediately after the suffering of those days the sun will be darkened... the powers of heaven will be shaken.”¹²

That is precisely what we see happening in the global situation. And we are shocked – and, apparently, taken by great surprise. We can also see it – if we have eyes to see, and are willing to take seriously the spiritual quest – in the convulsions of every level of our life.

Truth-facing generally requires individual, personal self-honesty. That is to say, insight, vision, true wisdom, requires that I begin with myself. To know oneself, said St Augustine, is to know God.

This is the key to Advent. ‘Staying awake’ begins *with me*. The spiritual task is fundamentally a task which each individual must undergo. Collective and communal ‘benefit’ can only come as the fruit of conscious, awake, enlightened individuals. We readily see what happens otherwise: great works of social good can be performed; but those who do them can be so destructive because they are unconscious, asleep, disconnected from their inner reality.

As for Ramanujan and for Jesus, knowledge of the Real comes like a great flash of lightning. The ‘lightning that comes from the east and flashes as far as the west’¹³ is symbolic of enlightenment, the gift of insight and understanding which does not come from reason or from outside things, but which is the fruit of contact with the inner world. Wakefulness means that when the Human One comes, the Kingdom makes itself felt and known as an unshakeable inner reality.

“Keep awake, therefore”.¹⁴ This means taking the inner reality seriously; like Noah preparing for the coming flood. *Maranatha!* Come Lord!

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¹⁰ Romans 13:11b

¹¹ John A Sanford, *The Kingdom Within: The Inner Meanings of Jesus’ Sayings*, New York: Paulist Press, 1970, p206.

¹² Matthew 24:21,24,27,29

¹³ Matthew 24:27

¹⁴ Matthew 24:44