

SERMON FOR ADVENT SUNDAY

29.11.09

So here we are again, yet another Advent Sunday! Yet again we Christians begin a new cycle of Sundays and other festivals which start just before Christmas and move through Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Pentecost and finally unravels at the end of all those Sundays after Trinity; round and round, year on year. It is not for nothing that the shape of the traditional Advent wreath is circular, expressing our *daily round, our common task*. Life, it says clearly, is like a carousel.

And yet: and yet this essentially Greek way of understanding time needs to be balanced by the rather more Jewish concept of time being one long line, a line on which we record events, as Eliza Brigham once said about progress: *it's just one darn thing after another*.

So then, our Advent Candles are arranged slightly differently this year – in a single line - expressing this other emphasis about time, the one our aging bodies never fails to remind us of, the one which says *we may be going round in circles, but we are also moving forward*. Perhaps in an ideal world we should attempt to harness both ideas – in an Archimedes screw for example - turning, turning, but inexorably moving in one direction; or alternatively recalling a snowball which at every rotation, picks up fresh snow - new experiences – and grows in the process. Sadly they defy my ability to represent them in a piece of Church furniture!

Either way, I would want to remind you of that key phrase from Isaiah 43:18 which tells us *not just to consider the former things, nor be obliged to return to the same place time and time again*; for the theme of hope within Advent is always about looking with eagerness for those things which God has yet to reveal.

And that is precisely the place for us to start our thinking this year. For one of the most obvious truths about our spiritual lives is that, while we are constantly repeating much of what we do, life is still shot through with visions of glimpses of God's glory – with Resurrection glory. And thank God for those moments for otherwise we would be ground down by the daily conflicts and disappointments that otherwise pepper our lives.

But we have to develop a more robust willingness to wait for those moments and not to rush, full steam ahead, based on our less than

complete awareness of what God is planning – and has probably already begun to reveal.

Let's take the story of Abraham and Sarah as an example. Abraham and Sarah are often used on the first Sunday of Advent as types to represent the Patriarchs on whose faith the whole of the Jewish Christian experience of God is based. The first candle is lit each year as we try to recall what they taught us.

And the story of Abraham and Sarah is certainly extraordinary. We have only time to pick up two bits of their story but I hope the rest will be familiar. The first shows the way in which God tells these two old people to leave absolutely everything that they were familiar with and to move to – God knows where – which he describes as the Promised Land. Goodbye to everything familiar – house, land, job, friends; everything.

And all for some dim and vague promise that *God would be with them*. But there would be no guarantees, no comforting small print about compensation if it all went wrong. Abraham is promised great things but we know, having read the story, that he would not even see these splendid rewards in his life-time. As Paula Gooder says in her excellent Advent book *'The Meaning is in the waiting'*: *God's call to Abraham is an example of God's more general invitation, to leaving and accompanying, to moving and changing, to growing and flourishing. It is part of human nature to yearn for stability, to put down roots and to stay put; but it is also a rule of nature that things that do not move do not live. Water that does not move becomes stagnant. The voice that spoke to Abraham still speaks to us: Go from the things that bind you, from the sense of your own identity, from your day to day way of being – to something that I will show you...*

But even that was not enough. For you remember the way God had promised that Abraham would be, ancient as he was, the father of many nations. No sooner has God made it possible for these two impossibly old people to have a son, Isaac, than we read of the story of Abraham taking young Isaac up the mountain, willing to kill his one and only child in sacrifice.

What is that all about? How could God say to Abraham that he would be the Father of the nations one minute, and then demand the life of the only child who could make that possible the next? What was God playing at?

Unless; unless he was saying that the ultimate goal is always in his hands and not ours – and that, impossible though it is for us to see how, we have to be willing to learn how to travel before he will show us what is at the end of our journey?

In other words, until we have learned to trust him and not to be over hasty with our judgments, we are not yet ready to receive the final rewards or to reach our destination.

For if the Abraham saga tells us anything, it is going to involve understanding how, when the descendants of Abraham and Isaac did finally achieve the goal of being multitudes, they only did so as slaves in Egypt! God's work in making them his people demanded yet more waiting, more changes, more self-discipline. Much more important than the goal was the process of making the people of Israel dependant on him, experiencing his presence, and discovering in the waiting that all these things had to be learned before the promises could be revealed and the rewards received.

So our Advent journey begins. Week by week we light our candles and journey in faith and in hope towards the destination which is Christ's coming at Christmas.

But who knows where the deeper journey will really end as we wait expectantly for the lessons of Abraham and Sarah, the prophets, John the Baptist and finally of Mary herself, to help to reveal God's plans for us, this year? Like the Archimedes screw, we are turning, turning. We are on our way.