

Advent 3 2024 Susannah Cornwall, St Thomas Church Exeter

First Coming

*He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.*

*He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine.*

*He did not wait till hearts were pure.
In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.*

*He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.*

*We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!*

Madeleine L'Engle [1918-2007]

(The Bible readings' texts from the Service are included at the foot of the article, for ease of reference.)

Our readings today are about good news, as befits our thoughts turning to Christmas and the incarnation, God coming into the world as a human, in Jesus, in among all the mess and indignity of real life. The poem in the pew sheet by Madeleine L'Engle sums this up well – “He came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt. To a world like ours, of anguished shame he came”.

One of the things you might notice in the Bible readings, though, is that they're offering us a very particular vision of good news, one that might sound more or less good depending on your perspective! The imagery is curiously violent: in Zephaniah God is imagined as a warrior, one who will “deal with all [Israel]’s oppressors”. That sounds ominous! Then, in the gospel reading from Luke, we hear John the Baptist say that there is a “coming wrath”, that trees which don’t bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire, that someone is coming after John who will clear the threshing floor with his winnowing fork, and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. Prophets are very often not comforting people to listen to!

Dealing with one group’s oppressors, renewing their fortunes, making a group renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, sounds good when it’s your group that’s being lifted up, singled out for favour, but maybe less so when your group is vanquished/humbled. We know that the Bible is one perspective, the Israelite perspective, on its dealings with God, but we also know that other

perspectives are available and that the groups that Israel considered its enemies, or those already living in the lands we are told that God promised the Israelites, might feel somewhat different about the coming wrath!

Madeleine L'Engle's poem reminds us that the world Jesus came into was unpromising: "He did not wait till the world was ready ... He did not wait for the perfect time ... He did not wait till hearts were pure". We might feel a little the same about our unpromising current world. Even so, in the gospel reading we also see a warning from Jesus not to get caught up in scarcity economics. Scarcity economics says: there's not enough to go round. It says that we (whoever "we" are) are in danger from outsiders; we need to cling tight to what we have because otherwise we won't survive. When we focus on scarcity we want to hoard - we are worried about what we have being taken away and we are defensive. We want God to vanquish the enemy and show that we are the real insiders, the ones who really own the good news. Here Jesus offers a different perspective: Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise. In other words, there is already enough to go round – it just takes some imagination to see who is part of one's community and who is part of those with whom we share.

One of the lovely things that's happened in St Thomas over the last few years is the development of the markets and festivals that have been held in the church and hall, with local traders, crafters and community workers bringing lots of people together around particular landmarks and times of the year. The church has often been involved by doing teas and coffees, cakes, or hot food from the kitchen, as well as lots of hard work in the background from Ian and others sorting out finances, insurance and more. I know that when these events first started, there was a bit of sadness, especially from people who'd been in the parish for a long time and remembered when the churches had done more of these sorts of things in their own right, and missed the days when there were enough of a critical mass of people in the congregations to be able to do that. There was a sense of "We should be doing all this ourselves". But another way of thinking about it is to recognize all the good that happens when, as a church, we are humble and hospitable, offering what we do have but without needing to set the agenda. Al Barrett, a rector in Birmingham who works on estates that a lot of people have written off as being places of pure deprivation and misery, has talked about this as "finding the treasure" already there in the community: not talking always about what a local community doesn't have, but what it does have.

I don't think this is about being smug, self-satisfied, or unselfcritical. It's not about pretending everything is rosy or that our communities don't experience underfunding, under-resourcing, and structural inequalities. But it is about stepping back as Christians from the kinds of patterns of relating to other groups that are hierarchical – that unproblematically says "we have something that you lack – we understand you better than you understand yourselves".

Advent is about a future we can't see yet. It's about a promise of a coming world that might seem impossibly distant from our current circumstances. We can't tell yet how to get from here to there.

Mariame Kaba, a scholar who has done a lot of work on the criminal justice system in the United States, is critical of the ways that the prison population there is over-represented by young Black men, and especially by those who have intellectual disabilities, who suffered trauma as children, who have mental health problems, and who were failed by conventional schooling. Kaba works in the abolitionist tradition and traces a historical line from present-day structures of prisons and policing backward to the slave patrols set up to allow White plantation owners to continue hoarding their wealth and punish those Black slaves who rebelled. Kaba and her fellow abolitionists are suggesting that built into the very structures of these systems are racism and unjust hierarchies, and that policing and prisons as we know them today are not fit for the purpose of bringing about more equitable

societies. Kaba notes that one common objection levelled to penal abolitionists is “But if we abolished prisons, how would we keep people safe?” Not only does Kaba point out that even from that point of view prisons don’t work – the rates of reoffending are very high, and prisoners tend to encounter and then go on to perpetuate even more extreme violence and abuse after they have been incarcerated than before – but Kaba also argues that if we wait to change our unjust penal structures until we have the ideal alternative structures in place, we never will do it. We never will feel ready. The point she is making is that we don’t have to wait until we know exactly what’s coming next before we name the fact that what’s in existence now is profoundly broken, damaged and damaging.

So, again: Advent is (also) about a future we can’t see yet. It’s about a promise of a coming world that might seem impossibly distant from our current circumstances. We can’t tell yet how to get from here to there. “He came when the Heavens were unsteady, and prisoners cried out for release … He came when the need was deep and great”, says L’Engle.

But we can look, without knowing how it could happen, to a world without enmity, where the talk won’t be of enemies and oppressors, where groups won’t identify over standing against one another, where they won’t be driven by fear of scarcity. Advent is about waiting with hope: holding onto the idea that our current ways of imagining the world are not the only possible ones, and that sometimes we have to let go of old patterns of scarcity politics, insiders and outsiders, to recognize the treasure already here.

This isn’t about restoration: it’s not about returning to a mythic time when everything was perfect. In the Zephaniah reading the people are yearning for a time when they were top nation, when everyone respected them. I think some people have similar feelings about Britain. They might also long for a time when Christianity was more widely observed. But I think we are being invited to think: even if that time did ever exist, we’re not going back there. We are in a time when we need to get used to inhabiting what might feel like waste places, unpromising places, and seeing the treasure already there without having to be in charge. The promise of Advent isn’t about restoration, but transformation.

*“We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!”*

Works cited

Barrett, Al (2023), *Finding the Treasure: Good News from the Estates*, London: SPCK

Kaba, Mariame (2021), *We Do This ‘Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transformative Justice*, Chicago, IL: Haymarket

The Bible readings’ texts

Zephaniah 3.14–20

¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵ The Lord has taken away the judgments against you;
he has turned away your enemies.

The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.

¹⁶On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

“Do not fear, O Zion;

do not let your hands grow weak.

¹⁷The Lord, your God, is in your midst,

a warrior who gives victory;

he will rejoice over you with gladness;

he will renew you^[c] in his love;

he will exult over you with loud singing

¹⁸ as on a day of festival.”^[d]

I will remove disaster from you,^[e]

so that you will not bear reproach for it.

¹⁹I will deal with all your oppressors

at that time.

And I will save the lame

and gather the outcast,

and I will change their shame into praise

and renown in all the earth.

²⁰At that time I will bring you home,

at the time when I gather you;

for I will make you renowned and praised

among all the peoples of the earth,

when I restore your fortunes

before your eyes, says the Lord.

Philippians 4.4–7

⁴Rejoice^[b] in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ^[c]Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 3.7–18

⁷John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

¹⁰And the crowds asked him, “What, then, should we do?” ¹¹In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise.” ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” ¹³He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ^[a] ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with^[b] the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

¹⁸So with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to the people.

