



Advent Sunday  
1 December 2013

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## Revelation in Exile

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

**Readings: Isaiah 2.1-5; Romans 13.11-end; Matthew 24.36-44**

Do you remember how in the winter of 2009 they installed huge tropical tree stumps in Trafalgar Square? It was a surreal sight. The stumps lay on their sides, beneath Nelson's column. Had these trees still been standing they would have been higher than the fifty metre column and much more beautiful. But it was not so much the tree trunks that fascinated; it was the huge buttress roots, lying exposed, cleaned of mud and the bird's nest web of smaller roots. The roots were magnificent, and one was made incredibly aware of how much of a tree is under the soil. The artist, Angela Palmer, who had had the trees transported all the way from Ghana said that "looking at the roots was like seeing the nerve endings of the planet. In Ghana in the last fifty years 90% of the primary rain forest has been lost." These rain trees lay on their sides like beached whales: wonderful but sad, because these roots should not be so exposed, they should be deep beneath the soil, burrowing down, holding, anchoring, nourishing – giving life to the trees which are the lungs of our world. We do not see what is beneath the ground but without it there would be no tree, no life.

Our theme for Advent this year, explored in our book of Advent reflections, is 'Revelation in Exile'. Revelation is when something which is hidden and unknown is disclosed to others – a secret, a truth, something which was previously unseen is suddenly opened up, shown out. For a moment think of those roots. We do not usually see them and yet the whole tree which we do see is completely dependent upon those roots. People are like that too. When we meet people we see what grows above the ground but we do not often see the roots of the person, the stories of their lives, like the maze of roots of the rain trees from Ghana.

On Friday I was privileged to take the funeral of a member of our congregation also from Ghana: Elizabeth Mensah, and I was reminded of those roots. Elizabeth Mensah attended St Martin's from 1986 onwards. She was a member of the Education Committee, she stewarded, she assisted with the chalice, she gave St Martin's the most beautiful stoles from Ghana which we still wear on feast days, and until she died, contributed each week to St Martin's planned giving. When she stopped coming to St Martin's because of poor health I visited her and took her communion. Elizabeth seemed a quiet, private, and humble person. I saw this, I saw her love of the church and her deep love of family but I did not see the buttress roots beneath the surface, until she died. But last week I had the deep privilege of meeting her daughter Nana Ya, and learnt a story about her life that was a revelation – an astonishing story of courage in exile, which, like those incredible roots of the Ghanaian rain tree, had previously remained hidden.

I learnt that in 1935 in Accra on the Gold Coast, at a time where most Ghanaian girls did not receive formal education, aged six, Elizabeth came home one day to announce to her surprised mother that she had enrolled herself in school and so began a love for education that was to continue all of her life and become a pillar of her life alongside her love for her four children and the Anglican Church. I learnt that Elizabeth was married to Joseph Henry Mensah who studied at the London School of Economics and became Minister of Finance in Ghana. And I learnt that in the military coup in Ghana in 1972 when the government was overthrown, her husband was taken into protective custody and was to spend more than eight years in prison. I heard how Elizabeth used to visit him in prison hiding copies of Newsweek and the Economist beneath home cooked food which she smuggled in to him. I learnt later how later in 1984 she came as a single mother to UK, feeling as

though she was exiled from Ghana. I learnt how she loved and supported her four children and how all four of them managed to get university educations she believed in. I heard the way she decided that St Martin-in-the-Fields, the church she had long listened to on the radio when in Ghana, was the church she wanted to belong to because she believed in racial inclusion and education for women and the Christian social values of St Martin's.

I was overwhelmed to hear the story of this incredibly humble yet courageous woman. In a life which, unbeknown to so many of those who knew her, had been such a rollercoaster of both fortune, human suffering and struggle, what was revealed to me was an incredible strength of Spirit.

How often when we see the world we see only the surface: a surface impression we are often quick to judge, or categorise. How often have you thought in your life, 'If only I had known?' 'If only I had seen the truth?' 'If only...' It is easy for us to miss the mystery of life and the depths beneath the surface. So much of our lives remain hidden and unknown. How easy it is to believe that the truth is only the projection we see above the surface and to dismiss the unseen as fantasy or fabrication, or simply never discover the real meaning of things. Perhaps those deepest truths are only fully known to God and only revealed to ourselves when we are uprooted from the familiar. And it is in the deep down things that we discover the revelation of God's presence – that buttress root, which holds us, nourishes us, sustains us – giving us life and growth. That incredible Psalm 139 describes this God presence:

If I climb up to heaven you are there, if I make the grave my bed you are there also.

Even darkness, is no darkness with you, the night is as clear as the day.

My body was not hidden from you, while I was being made in secret and woven in the depths of the earth.

So often we can live the distraction, we live the Twitter, the superficial, the desire to see and possess, to fill our lives with stuff and clutter – so much so that we convince ourselves that the surface image is everything and we no longer realise that it is in God that we live and move and have our being. Separated from that love, that root, that vine, we wither. And so often when we see the other, the stranger, the newcomer, we do not hear or see the deeper story, the God story.

The season of Advent is really about awakening to God's story in the deep down weaving of our lives, and God's story in the lives of others too. Advent says the coming of Christ begins with actually allowing ourselves time: time to wait, to watch, to listen; time to actually wait in darkness – a darkness which says 'I do not know the answers but I will remain open to the mystery of God's revelation of God both in and beyond myself.' For as Psalm 139 says: 'Even darkness is no darkness with you, the night is as clear as the day.' Those revelations of God when we actually live with a readiness to receive them, are in fact all around us, as our newsletter front cover describes today. If you listen to some of the stories of the St Martin's Christmas Appeal, for example, you will hear just that. The story of how God's love is going to be revealed perhaps in the place where you least expected to find it: in the deepest moment of powerlessness, the moments of struggle and loss, the times when because of the government rules and regulations there was no room in any inn nor any other accommodation available. And it's not just about other people out there on the radio. It's also about you. God's love for you and through you. The roots beneath the surface which because they remain unseen we have never fully acknowledged or allowed to grow as deep as they might. Our Gospel today is a call to live that waiting, that advent in readiness and faith. It is a call to wake up. There is a real possibility that we will miss what it's all for or what it's all about – never to glimpse the truth of the revelation beneath the surface; never to discover the treasure of great price because we are too caught up in the busyness of avoiding; to wake up too late and discover that the Saviour has been and gone and we missed him.

So, as we begin Advent, the challenge is to create space and opportunities for God's revelation. How does one do that? Well perhaps one simple way is to stop talking and to start listening, to stop

looking for and to start beholding, to stop doing and to start being, to stop condemning and to start forgiving, to stop judging on appearances and to start discovering God's hidden story deep within you, and perhaps the person next to you. The deepest level of communication is not communication but communion. It is beyond words, beyond speech, beyond concept.

Now, in the depths of our lives, is the time to discover that communion with God and that communion with one another. Be ready for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.