

Sunday 30 November: First Sunday in Advent

Creating Space

Sermon preached at the Advent Carol Service



There are perhaps times all our lives where we glimpse the scale of things. The picture on the front of your service sheet is a view through the Hubble telescope of star forming clouds in the Omega Nebula, in the rich starfields of the Sagittarius area of the Milky Way.

Earth's distance to the Omega Nebula is between 5,000 and 6,000 light-years and it spans some 15 light-years in diameter. A cluster of 35 stars lies embedded in the nebulosity and it is these hot, young stars' radiation that excites the gases in the nebula to shine. Contrast the scale of that nebula with the form of that small baby with its umbilical cord cut into a block of stone on the portico of our church – the tiny-ness and delicateness of human life in comparison to the enormity of this universe. The other day when I was opening up the church in the morning I found a homeless man up on the top of that block of stone sleeping coiled around the baby. “What are you doing up there?” I asked. “I’m just keeping the baby warm” he answered. It is a powerful image. The Word made flesh calling out for the love, warmth and protection that all of us need: an image of the miracle and also the vulnerability of human life.

I've often thought of human vulnerability when out at sea especially at night. I've been through some rough seas... where life felt no more than a piece of matchwood in the enormity of time and space. A prayer we use when setting out to sea in the South Pacific captures this sense of human frailty:

Dear God be good to me;
the sea is wide and deep
and my canoe is so very small.

Perhaps you too have looked up at the stars, or climbed mountains, or flown through skies, or crossed oceans and wondered like the psalmist:

“What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?”

Perhaps you too have had those terrifying moments of existential dread and questioned God's silence – when all mindfulness seems to be absent, when this question of the psalmist goes unanswered because there seems no-one to answer it, and there is only a yawning sense of alienation and loss. I remember visiting my Great Aunt in hospital when I was a teenager. I loved her greatly; she was a woman who attracted a lot of attention, people used to run round after her, she was always at the centre of things. But now in hospital things were different. She was obviously dying and she was calling for things and expecting things to be put right: “Why can't I feel better? Why won't the nurse come? Why can't I get up? Why don't they do something for me?” I remember feeling so sad. Because I loved her I wanted her to see what we could see, that she was dying, that she was on the brink of eternity: that somehow she had to prepare, open her eyes to a greater space, an eternity to which none of us had the answers.

Job of course is the greatest of questioners and it's hard not to take his side against a God who seems not only unfair but cruel. This righteous man seems to be suffering far more than anyone deserves. He calls out:

There is no relief from my suffering
I am no better off than dirt
I call to you God but you never answer.

And when I pray you pay no attention
You are treating me cruelly
You persecute me with all your power
And let the wind blow me away
You toss me about in the raging storm
I know you are taking me to my death.

When God's answer finally comes to Job it seems at first as if it fails to answer any of the questions he has posed. We heard the passage tonight:

“The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: were you there when I laid the foundation of the earth...? Have you entered the springs of the sea, walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?”

God's answer, seems to leave Job completely unanswered, but perhaps it is more a stepping back - a vision through suffering - as though the questions are reframed and Job is called to look beyond himself into the mystery and meaning of all things where God not Job is at the centre. Job's agonising cry of “Why?” “Why me?” is being dissolved and transcended by a letting go of “the me” into the wonder of God whose ways are beyond all human understanding. But perhaps

you feel we are letting God off the hook too easily? There is a sense in which the journey of our scripture is our waiting for God's answer to be revealed.

Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, whose writing is being much discussed at the moment as it is 40 years after his death, was able to express our search for God with great honesty and growing wisdom. Merton said:

"Faith is not the suppression of doubt it is the overcoming of doubt and you overcome doubt by going through it. A person of faith who has not experienced doubt is not a person of faith."

Waiting upon God involves facing the anguish of realising that underneath the apparently well organised and rational life, there lies an abyss of mystery, confusion, pointlessness and indeed of apparent chaos: where things don't all add up, where tragedy cannot be explained, where suffering is an unanswered cry, where we simply don't understand. This, writes Merton "is what immediately impresses itself upon the person who renounces diversion, it cannot be otherwise: for in renouncing diversion we renounce the seemingly harmless pleasure of building a tight, self-contained illusion about ourselves and about our little world. We accept the difficulty of facing the million things in our lives which are incomprehensible. It is only when the apparent absurdity and mystery of life is faced that real faith becomes possible."

Otherwise faith too becomes a diversion, a safe formula, a means of control rather than the source of life. Faith needs the space of the wilderness to root and grow:

The Lord says in our reading from Isaiah "I am about to do a new thing, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."

Advent is traditionally set aside as time of waiting; a time in which we are called to create space for God to create space in us. "Do you not perceive it?" How different this is from the prevailing philosophy of our culture. This week I was given a cartoon to look at which shows two shepherds looking up at a very bright star and away from their rather disgruntled sheep. The caption reads "You know it's strange but ever since that star appeared I have had an overwhelming desire to go shopping!" Waiting is not something many of us do easily. The pressure is always on to make Christmas begin now: to take the waiting out of wanting, to cut to the finale, like scoring the goals without the football match. The Advent book that has been chosen for us to follow at St Martin's is written by Paula Gooder and it is called "The Meaning is in the Waiting". It is a wonderful exposition of what it means to create space for God to come.

Many of our prayers, like the psalms, are prayers of petition or anguish but there is another type of prayer – the prayer of God's presence. Prayer can move us as tonight's scripture moves – into the space of God's presence: presence even in struggle; presence in joy but also in pain; presence even in death itself. When we face the tragedies of our lives and those we love, the things that really matter, when we do not have the answers, we have only God for God is the eternal love in all our loving.

"See the home of God is among mortals, God himself will be with them, he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, mourning and crying will be no more for the first things have passed away..."

The answer to all our questioning of God is this baby we wait for, this Christ child. God answers the vistas of time and space and the billions of light years with a tiny child at the end of a mother's umbilical cord – a baby who is silent, who cannot answer but yet is God's answer to us all. And all we are asked to do is to make a space ready for him.