

Sunday 2 December 2007: Advent Carol Service

Reading the signs

So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

*Mute, with signs I speak:
Blind, by groping seek:
Heed; yet nothing hear:
Feel; find no one near.*

*Deaf, eclipsed and dumb,
Through this gloom I come
On the time-path trod
Toward ungranted God.*

A few weeks ago, our children's club here at St Martin's explored the story of the lost sheep. After a game of Sheep Bingo where sheep number 100 was eventually found under the table, we then shared some of our own experiences of what it feels like to be lost. There were a number of adults in the group, and all of us were able to recall quite vividly our own childhood memories of being lost – whether it was being separated from family by a sudden influx of people in the terrifying wilderness that is Abergavenny Market in my case or finding ourselves alone on a mountainside by running adventurously ahead in another. Those experiences may have been short-lived but the feelings they engendered stayed with us – fear, bewilderment – looking for signs or people that just weren't there. Anyone who's been caught in a "whiteout" on a mountainside will say the same – with no obvious signs on the landscape, you become disoriented, unable to work out the direction you've come from or are trying to move to – you either stumble around in panic or find yourself rooted to the spot in fear.

The Scriptural signs we are given as Advent begins are pretty bewildering in themselves. In the reading we heard from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples of signs in the sun and the moon; stars falling from the sky; the powers of heaven shaken and the Son of Man coming on the clouds with power and glory. All that is as far removed from the secular signs of preparations for Christmas that dominate our shopping streets as it's possible to get. But those images don't just conflict with the tinsel and fairy lights that are the signs of the commercial Christmas. For most modern day Christians they bring us face to face with uncomfortable questions. How do we read these signs that speak of judgement and the coming of Christ in glory? How do we begin to relate the coming of the Prince of Peace to the call of the prophets that God might tear open the heavens and come down and cause the nations to tremble at God's presence?

Actually, if you look at the broader landscape, while we've not yet seen stars falling from the sky, many of the signs that define our direction as individuals, nations and as a global community are looking distinctly wobbly and uncertain. The economic institutions and financial structures that seemed to offer relative stability are now looking something less than rocklike, and there's a nervousness about what the future holds for our mortgages, pensions and investments. Peace in Israel/Palestine, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan remain elusive; signs of long-term security are fragile. The situation in Sudan this week has reminded us just how high feelings and tensions can become when there is a lack of trust between faiths, cultures or people, and how defensive all of us are when our grip on what power we have is threatened.

Then the signs of global warming fill us with an often helpless anxiety for ourselves or future generations, and we perhaps begin to understand what it means for creation to groan in travail. And if you're sitting in Downing Street at the moment, you must be wondering who took the signs marked competency and replaced them with "Danger ahead"!

At a personal level, I think I now appreciate in a way I didn't years ago, just how powerful and pertinent, that apocalyptic language of Jesus to his disciples is. I've begun to understand the sort of medieval imagery of judgement and hell depicted in art and poetry of the time. Looking outside and within, I can recognise what it means to find myself in a landscape without obvious signs, and fighting the temptation to blunder around in panic, or remain frozen in fear. While on retreat in the summer and contemplating some of these images, I wrote:

"I cannot imagine a life lived in rejection of God having anything to hold it together or to give it direction. I recall those deeply painful yet thankfully short-lived experiences of feeling utterly lost from God and can understand those depictions of a bottomless pit, of having nothing to check the fall, of the potentially unstoppable descent into complete inner chaos that this brings."

The signs with which we begin Advent pose difficult and challenging questions for us. But those signs don't leave us standing in that stark and empty place. Like lightning flashes in the darkness, they give us glimpses of the way ahead.

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Toward ungranted God.*

The signs of Advent moves us, in those words of Siegfried Sassoon, "on the time-path trod towards ungranted God". They move us onwards in two directions – to the gathering up of all things in the coming of Christ in glory; and they move us on as we recognise the presence of God-with-us, Christ incarnate in child of Bethlehem whose signs we seek this and every Advent.

Time and again, in the readings we've heard this evening, it is the God in whom all things hold together and the God who is God-with-us who speaks to his people and illuminates landscapes which seem empty and stark.

Moses, running away from his own people and his own destiny, finds himself face to face with the sign of the burning bush – face to face with the God who to all eternity says "I AM" and yet calls the fearful and bewildered Moses to walk with him in the deliverance of his people from slavery.

The prophets Isaiah and Zephaniah called to speak to a people in exile – far from home; far from signs of the familiar. Yet those prophets speak powerfully of a God whose Kingdom will come in righteousness and justice and truth, bringing light to the nations and freedom to

captives. And in the same breath they speak passionately of a God who weeps over his people, who bears their reproach and who longs for them to walk with him on level paths.

Paul the apostle writing to the Romans, is blessed with the insight to read the signs of God's presence both in the sufferings and struggles of the present and in the glory that is to be revealed.

Time and again, we see the eternal dimension of God's coming – the theological equivalent of a cosmic satellite navigation system – coupled with the God who journeys with his people – the faithful companion on the road.

This Advent, as always, we find ourselves held in the tension of the now and the not-yet – of watching and waiting for the signs of God in the here and now and the coming of the Kingdom for which we constantly pray. In the murky landscapes of our inner and outer lives, those signs can be hard to find. Yet for Siegfried Sassoon, in that poem *Faith Unfaithful*, it is the presence of God in our flesh and blood that enables him to keep journeying when signs are few:

*“Carnal, I can claim,
Only his know name,
Dying, can but be
One with him in me.”*

One with him in me - the presence of God-with-us – the revealing of God-with-us in the child of Bethlehem opens our eyes to signs of the eternal. The signs of Advent with their inherent tensions place Christ's coming at Bethlehem in the context of eternity. And in so doing, they place us in that landscape too; they open our eyes to what we are now and what we are called to be and to become. The signs of judgement and the signs of hope are held together in that presence of Christ – God-with-us and the one who is to come. Together they point us to that day, when, in the words of the mystic Teilhard de Chardin:

“...the presence of Christ which has been silently accruing in all things will be revealed – like a flash of light from pole to pole. Breaking through all the barriers within which the veil of matter and the water-tightness of souls have seemingly kept it confined, it will invade the face of the earth”.
So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates.