

Sunday 16 December 2007: Third Sunday in Advent

Reading the Signs of Creation

Readings: Isaiah 35. 1-10; Matthew 11. 2-11

“Rejoice in the Lord always!” This is the invitation which is given to us today by Isaiah. But this may seem a little hard at times. For those who have been listening to the arguments which took place at the Bali Climate Summit, the frustrations and tensions were palpable. As I began writing this, John Humphries, even by his own confrontational standards, seemed to have lost all patience with the injustice of it all while interviewing Hillary Ben who was attending the conference. Surely he argued now is the time to speak out clearly against American policy and make sacrifices, we can’t just go in offering limitless choices with no specific targets and how can we be planning another runway at Heathrow for example? Have we not read the signs of the times? When we first started to hear about the dangers of climate change we were told that there was a possibility of losing the northern polar ice cap by the end of the 21st century, three years ago the figures were revised to say that this could happen by 2050. This week they are saying it could disappear in the next 5-7 years. We have all heard the facts. Twenty out of twenty one hottest years ever measured in atmospheric record have taken place in the last twenty five years. 2005 was the hottest year ever recorded, 2007 is expected to be the second hottest year ever recorded. Almost all coral reefs in the world will die or disappear if temperatures continue to rise. The livelihoods of many millions of people living along the coasts of tropical developing countries will be lost. Many of the world’s poorest are most at risk from flooding, cyclone, draught and the destruction of the ecosystem which has sustained their lives. In the words of Winston Churchill facing a different threat: “The era of procrastination, of half measures, of soothing and baffling expedients, of delays is coming to a close. In its place we are entering a period of consequences.”

Many of the places where I have lived in the Pacific and South East Asia are the most vulnerable. Many of the pacific islands are barely one or two metres above sea level and only protected by their coral reefs. In South East Asia it is the coastal lands where so many of the landless poor settle to try and create a livelihood from the sea. These, as we have seen in the tsunamis and flooding, are those who are most at risk. I have also seen at first hand in the Pacific and South East Asia the destruction caused by the logging companies ripping out all the tropical hard wood trees from the rainforest for export. I have seen native landowners and chiefs selling the inheritance of future generations for a handful of dollars and the false promises of logging companies to provide infrastructure and resources for communities. A year down the track I have seen rainforest turned into cracked, dead lunar landscape where nothing will grow, rivers silted up and poisoned, villages divided by the influx and exploitation of logging companies, the bridges they promised now broken, the engines and trucks and generators with which they bribed the landowners now rusting and useless. And the government’s integrity undermined by lucrative handouts and bribery. I have seen the trucks and bulldozers tearing through the forest creating vast scars where rain trees will never grow again. The bulldozers, smash all in their path, dragging the logs through the deepening trenches of mud down onto the beach like huge dead bodies. I have seen vast mountains of massive tree trunks piled on the sea shore waiting to be taken away by cargo-ships. It is modern piracy. It is theft on a massive scale. What is more - deforestation accounts for twenty percent of global carbon emissions.

The prophet Isaiah tells us words of such hope. He says that the deserts shall rejoice and blossom. He says: “be strong, do not fear!” He says: “the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped”. But perhaps we sometimes feel we have a bit more in

common with John the Baptist despairing in prison. John the Baptist who has pointed us towards the hope of the coming Messiah now fears he has got it all wrong - doubt has set in. He has lost confidence in the future. From prison things no longer look clear. He sends his disciples out to ask Jesus "Are you the Messiah, the one who will save us, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus does not answer the question with words or promises, he answers with the evidence of the transformation and healing which has already begun: "Go and tell John what you hear and see, the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them." This is a hope which is NOT a distant unobtainable dream in the future - this is the reality of a concrete hope already begun today. It has begun among those most in need, among the seemingly powerless.... those who have most sought, and needed transformation. It is the poor of the earth who have become the witness to the human possibility for change and empowerment. It is they who have read the signs, realised their need of God, and also realised, in themselves, God's healing power.

However small and powerless we may be, salvation we are shown is not a dream, it is the reality of the God who has come to us and lived among us. Salvation begins **now**, with us. Martin Luther was asked what he would do if the world were to end tomorrow and he said he would plant a tree today. Last weekend I saw thousands of people of all ages and nationalities who had travelled to London from every part of the country to demonstrate their passionate concern about climate change and their love for creation. I watched for over half an hour as this demonstration walked by. These thousands were evidence of the change which is happening amongst us.

Two weeks ago, St Martin's 20s-30s Group went to Hilfield Friary in Dorset and spent that time reflecting upon our own relationship with creation. What seem to strike us all very forcefully is that our Gospel demands a response. Brother Samuel, a Franciscan who has began a the Hilfield Project for Ecology, Peace and Reconciliation, spoke to us passionately of the fundamental change in orientation that he believes is needed. It is not simply a matter of bargaining with carbon emissions. He argued that creation can no longer be treated as some sort of limitless store-house which can be relentlessly plundered to satisfy our needs. Treating the land and sea like a vast supermarket which can provide the consumer with every conceivable choice of product, on demand twenty four hours a day every day of the year while other vast areas of the planet go hungry, is simply abhorrent. We cannot oppress the natural world any longer just as we cannot countenance slavery or oppression of women or children or people because of their colour or sexuality. The idea of the natural world as a utility over which we have mastery and dominion mining it, cutting it up, ripping it apart, polluting it, dumping our non degradable waste in it, killing it forcing it to give up its riches - is simply unsustainable. And alongside this is the realisation of another orientation - the revelation of God in Christ - the orientation of God who is revealed in and for creation. A God who calls us not as competitors but as those who share a common life - a life which is a gift, the gift of God. Just as we have seen an awakening, the opening of the eyes and ears to voices of other cultures and nations, so we are seeing a reawakening to our true relationship with the natural world - as St Francis of Assisi sung to them: "Brother Son, Sister, Moon, mother earth, brother fire, sister water"- all part of the same family. The words which St Francis used to describe our relationship with creation were "courtesy" and "piety". Both are words which describe relationship of honour, deep humility and thoughtfulness. The word courtesy contains that sense of respect, and the bestowing of dignity. Piety is ones sense of duty and reverence towards another because of the bond of blood relationship.

In Advent we are called to read these signs of our times and to respond, but to respond in the knowledge of a God who loves the world so much that he sends his only son. The belief that pending disaster can be the advent of hope, that the threat we are facing can and must lead to a reorientation of our relationships with God, one another and the world entrusted to our care. What is astonishing is how powerful this desire for a transformed ecological attitude is becoming. What is remarkable is that the Bali summit has happened at all and that the whole world has focused on it. And we have seen the passion and commitment of those attending. I began writing this address when no one believed that any kind of universal agreement was possible. As I finish I hear on the news that a consensus of sorts of all nations has been reached. There is still so far to go but it is a very real sign that the outpouring of international feeling is moving towards real change.

Al Gore in his speech asks this question in Bali: “not long from now, when your children assess what we and our generation did in this world they will ask one of two questions. They will look back and either they will ask what were you thinking? Didn’t you hear the warnings? Didn’t you see the glaciers melting, the deserts growing, the droughts deepening, the crops drying up? People dying. Didn’t you care? What were you thinking?”

Or they will ask a second question: How did you find the moral courage to successfully address a crisis that so many said was impossible. How were you able to start the process that unleashed the moral imagination of humankind, to see ourselves as a single global civilisation?

In our Gospel today Jesus says: So go back and tell what you see and hear so that the blind receive their sight and the poor have good news brought to them.