Sunday 10 December: Second Sunday of Advent

“Who and when?”


The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.  
But who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears?  
All flesh shall see the salvation of God  

In the 54th year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, when George Bush Jr was President of the United States and Tony Blair was Prime Minister of the UK, during the Archeepiscopacy of Rowan Williams in Canterbury and the incumbency of Nick Holtam at St Martin-in-the-Fields in Trafalgar Square, the word of God came to…? Well, that’s when I got stuck. In attempting to translate the word we’ve just heard from Luke’s Gospel into our present context I found myself wondering: The word of God comes to who, is spoken through who at this point in history?

Who? and when? are two of the crucial questions of this and every other Advent season. Not just who is speaking the word of God but who are we waiting for? And when might our Advent waiting expectation be fulfilled? Perhaps more crucially, if the who and when might actually come to fulfilment at this time, would we even notice it?

At one level the who and when of our Advent waiting are easily answered. The who is the Christ child and the when is Christmas Day. It’s obvious and familiar. Except of course, it’s not, as the perennial tension of this time of year, when we try to hold to marking Advent on a Sunday while gorging on a diet of Christmas carols during the week reminds us. And just in case we’re in any doubt about the hard edge to the questions of who and when, the prophet Malachi makes it explicit.

“The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.  “But who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears?”

I have to confess that now more than ever, the big cosmic feel of the early weeks of Advent, encapsulated by those words of Malachi, is what speaks to me most powerfully. Last week, I found myself longing, in a way which I’ve never experienced before, for the familiar words of the Collect of Advent Sunday, praying that we may be given grace to cast away the works of darkness and to put on the armour of light. I’m not quite sure what that is about, but I’m beginning to think that I’ll almost be sorry when the focus changes and we turn towards Bethlehem and the coming of the Christ child rather than the coming in glory. Except, of course, as the historian Luke reminds us, there is and has to be a connection between the particular and the cosmic, between the incarnation of God in the child of Bethelehem and the Christ who will gather all things up in his coming at the last day. The particularity of the word of God which spoke to John the Baptist in the 15th year of the Emperor Tiberius, the word of God which spoke in human flesh 2000 years ago, the word of God which speaks somewhere through someone in 21st century London has in some way to speak to us of the word which will speak in judgement and justice at the coming of Christ in glory.

“The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.  “But who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears?”
In writing some of that last paragraph, found my fingers hovering uncertainly over the keyboard – could I really use the word judgement and talk about the last days with such certainty and not compromise my liberal credentials? The Hebrew prophets, such as Malachi whose words we heard earlier had no such qualms. Ask the who and when questions of Malachi and you get the answers – a purifying and refining God before whom merely standing is a challenge to mortals.

The prophet Malachi is someone who should speak with some resonance for us here at St Martin’s. Put together a Luke-like list of who was doing what in Malachi’s time and you’ll find our old friends Ezra and Nehemiah appearing among the priestly and secular leadership of the people of Israel at the time. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah, telling as they do of the rebuilding of the Temple and the return of the people from exile, have become familiar to us in expressing some of our community’s hopes at a time of rebuilding. Malachi was speaking, on the face of it at least, into a situation of hope, yet he reminds the people of Israel the Lord whom they sought would ask searching questions of them until they presented themselves in righteousness before the Lord. Who and when? Perhaps what Malachi and the other prophets are actually pointing to is the inaccessibility of God, rejecting the image of a God “on call” to a particular sect or nation or culture, a God made in our image and giving God the freedom to be God.

“The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. “But who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears?”

Talking about the inaccessibility of God feels even more threatening to my liberal credentials than talking about judgement. But I think I’m coming to the conclusion that the reason I feel increasingly and passionately drawn to the cosmic and apocalyptic images of early Advent is that their very inaccessibility makes God so much more real. While so many of the modern church’s attempts to make God “accessible” and relevant, leave us with a domesticated, emasculated, and ultimately for me at least, unbelievable God, it’s the ability of the prophets and apocalyptic writers to express the inexpressible that makes the God of the particular so much more possible.

Our theme for Advent this year is “to the ends of the earth” – it was chosen deliberately to pick up some of the images of the prophetic writings that we hear during these weeks of Advent. But it also carries with it an ambiguity that somehow captures that tension between the particular and the cosmic – between the God who in coming in the flesh of Jesus Christ touched all humanity, and yet who remains beyond all that human mind can see or experience or imagine, and who refuses to be confined by the limits we set for God.

As I’ve listened to the news in the past week, and pondered that reading from Malachi, I’ve found myself wondering what sort of God I seek now here in the 21st century in the particularity of my life and the communities of which I am a part. What sort of God can bring redemption to this world at this time when we apparently seek security by spending £20billion on weapons which have the capacity to bring about the very end of the earth? What sort of God can hold forth the possibility of salvation to all flesh, through all times, into an uncertain and vulnerable future for our planet, and yet speak to us with meaning and purpose to me, to us, today – at 10.30am on the 10th December 2006, in this tiny part of the universe?

What sort of God? Only a God who answers our who and when questions with the freedom to be God: only a God with the freedom to clothe God’s very inaccessibility in human flesh; only a God with the freedom to choose to limit that freedom and enter his temple in the
particularity of time and place, and yet to be the God of judgment and history, of present and future and beyond time to the ends of the earth.

Where is the word of God spoken today, at this point of history? In all those places where we are the one who is God to the ends of the earth and beyond confronts us with the reality of his inaccessible glory and searching judgement, and yet invites us in the here and now to offer him our very selves.

*The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.*

*All flesh shall see the salvation of God.*