



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 19th November 2023

Readings: *Zephaniah 1.7, 12-18; Psalm 90; I Thessalonians 5.1-11; Matthew 25.14-30*

The second Sunday before Advent

Sometimes in my encounter with God I need answers.

I need to know that those I have loved and lost a while are safe with God.

I am not especially fussed at that moment about how that might be. Intellectually, narratives of the death and resurrection of Christ nourish my exploration of how God's victory over death can become our victory- that because Christ lives, they will live ¹ - but there are days when I need the sophistication of all that theology to have a straightforward bottom line, that whether we live or die we belong to the Lord, ² and nothing will separate us from God's love. ³

Then, there are days I need simply to know that God is God – that from 'once upon a time' until 'kingdom come', God is God. ⁴

Lots of the time I cherish Anselm's aphorism that 'theology is faith seeking understanding', ⁵ and I can revel in exploring this theory and that nuance. But there are days when everything around us seems so fragile, so fractious, and even, so futile, that I find myself needing the simplicity of clinging to the One from whom, through whom and to whom all things are. ⁶ It maybe that on those days, I am holding on by my fingertips. That's fine, because all I need is to trust that what matters is not my holding on to God but God's holding on to me.

And sometimes I just want to know how to live this life so that my life and everyone else's thrives.

I have shelves of books on discipleship, on ethics and on mission. How grateful I am that when every page has been read, they say nothing more essential than did Jesus, responding to a question about what matters most. There will be flourishing when and wherever we love God with heart and soul and mind and strength, and love our neighbour as ourself. ⁷

Yes, sometimes in my encounter with God I need these answers, because life is hard, and I mess it up. And even when my own life is not hard – and it rarely *is* hard - it is impossible to be unaware of how hard life is for others: partners in cruel relationships, abusers of substances that damage the body and the mind, people not at home in their body, victims of war, of poverty, of injustice, of life-threatening disease. Then I need the God of that radically all-embracing love, even if I must accept the fundamental truth about Love, which Emily Dickinson sums up when she writes:

'That love is all there is,
Is all we know of Love'. ⁸

That'll do, won't it?

But, those aren't all my days. Ultimately for me easy answers *aren't* enough. I don't find it helpful, less still credible, to be putting my trust in a God who is so small that the poor reach of my mind can sum up that God in a few answers. It's partly why I need Advent, just two weeks away now. You see, Advent and its approach take us on a journey less of answers than of exploration. Its readings – such as the opening words of both Zephaniah and I Thessalonians – depict the state of

¹ John 14.19

² Romans 14.8

³ Romans 39

⁴ Peterson, Eugene H. 2002 *Psalm 90.2* in *The Message: the Bible in contemporary language* Colorado Springs: NavPress page 1026

⁵ St Anselm (1033/4-1109) 'fides quarens intellectum' – perhaps well interpreted as "an active love of God seeking a deeper knowledge of God", cf Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/index.html>, accessed 19th November 2023

⁶ Romans 11.36 (NRSV)

⁷ Mark 12.28ff

⁸ Johnson, Thomas H. ed 1970 *Emily Dickinson: the complete poems* London: Faber and Faber page 714

the world and its people as stirring God's anger, as needing God's rescue. The passages expose and explore our complacency and wickedness, our self-sufficiency and attempt at easy answers – witness that 'wicked and lazy slave' who hid the master's money instead of working with it so its potential was fulfilled. These passages all urge us, as the Junior Church did, to be ready for God, ready for God to do God's 'mysterious, majestic God-ing' thing.⁹

We will be disappointed if we read these passages with the desire for immediate and undemanding answers. Moreover, they reveal the stark contrast between those who 'get' what the Bible suggests God requires, and those who resist it, ignore it, or haven't had the privilege that you and I have had of getting to know it. Some are surprised by God's coming, others awake and eager. Some are complacent, others prepared. Some luxuriate in the delights of the darkness of the night, others enjoy the light of the day. In one sense, the message is brief and clear: be ready! But in another, Zephaniah the prophet and Paul the apostle tantalise us with poetry that gets us thinking, and offers us a lifetime of contemplation.

I say 'poetry' because understanding these words as poetry so enriches and expands their potential. As prose to be taken literally, there's the risk that they become confined to one meaning, but read as poetry, we immediately open ourselves to the expansiveness that defines almost all poetry. That way it can mean 'this' to you and 'that' to me and as we discuss it, we both grow in understanding. Moreover, poetry is not always meant to be as easy as a limerick or as obvious as a nursery rhyme. I wonder what you made of the words that Mark sang as one of our preludes this morning? Joe Henry's lyric is not transparent. If you think it is, then forgive my density. It is less 'answer' than musing; less conclusion than contemplation. His whole purpose in *Blood from Stars*, the album from which that song comes, is to give us a 'raw', unrefined text, which 'leave threads hanging'.¹⁰

The state of the world certainly opens our eyes and our minds to the need for God to come 'with healing in his wings' as we will sing in Charles Wesley's carol 'Hark! the herald angels sing' in a month's time. But the state of the world also leaves us caught up in the 'now and not yet' mystery of God's saving work. It's a promise that we trust; it's a hope we hold to; it is a lifestyle by which we wish to be defined ourselves, but we are left wondering how it fits with what makes us feel so vulnerable to the world's instability as Advent 2023 approaches. You see, it is a thread left hanging. And for me that is why we need the season of Advent. It's a season of teasing texts that can stretch the brain as they offer hope. They are worth grappling with. Advent saves us from reducing Christmas to a sanctified baby shower, where we celebrate the stork's hovering rather than the angels' message of peace and goodwill for all. Advent is there to arrest and awaken us to the reality of what God offers in Jesus as Saviour, as victor over sin and death, as instrument of God's reign of justice and peace, as bearer of the inextinguishable light that shines in the darkness. How apposite for this day and age!

So, Advent as a season of preparation is itself worth preparing for. On Advent Sunday, when the sanctuary is filled with the ancient song *O come, O come Emmanuel*, we're invited to be ready, to be careful what we ask for, but above all to share Joe Henry's trust that

Shadows, fear, covers you like clothes,
but, likewise, so does love and grace.¹¹

And that is enough of an answer for me. May it be for others, too.

So be it. Amen.

N. P. Uden

19th November 2023

⁹ cf Brueggemann, Walter 2008 *Prayers for a Privileged People* Nashville: Abingdon Press pp 3f

¹⁰ Henry, Joe 2023 from the website *Blood from Stars*

Available at <https://www.joehenrylovesyoumadly.com/blood-from-stars#:~:text=Joe%20Henry's%20new%20record%20Blood,man%20that%20I%20keep%20hid.%E2%80%9D>

Accessed 18th November 2023

¹¹ Henry, Joe 2009 in *Light no lamp when the sun comes down*, from the album *Blood from Stars*