



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 22nd December 2024

Readings: *Micah 5.2-5a; Psalm 80.1-7; Hebrews 10.5-10; Luke 1:39-45*

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Throughout the years of my ministry, Advent has frequently been a season to offer words of hope into a globally difficult situation.

- In the 1980s, the AIDS crisis was at its most death-dealingly awful, with fewer remedies than subsequently became available, and an attitude to same sex love that more rarely than now dared speak its name, ¹ and instead used it to explain away the epidemic as a ‘gay plague’.
- Late in the 1980s, the sunrise of *Die Mauer* coming down and of Mandela walking free was preceded by that deeper darkness which so often goes before such a dawn, with some of the bitterest elements of the Cold War, the violently suppressed [Tiananmen Square protests](#) in [Beijing](#), and particularly grim episodes in *apartheid*-resisting South Africa.
- The noughties saw, as we still see, the aftermath of 9/11, when New York’s Twin Towers were destroyed, and some 3000 people lost their lives. Its legacy includes lifelong illness, lingering trauma, and a global instability characterised by some as a ‘widespread distrust of the voices of authority’, ² seen to let us down.
- In the early 2020s, none were exempt from the impact of Coronavirus Covid 19, and too many paid a high price, which for some has been the premature death of a loved one, and for others an abiding psychological and educational damage.
- Throughout the period, two other scenarios have dominated. First, financial crises have tripped over each other, with impacts of which the most consistent is the ever-widening gap between those who have more than enough and those who don’t. As the Bank of England emphasises, ‘*The (2008) financial crisis revealed how a seemingly isolated issue in one country could have far-reaching consequences.*’³
- Secondly, the climate emergency. In the words of the Natural History Museum, ‘*We are living in a time many people refer to as the Anthropocene. Humans have become the single most influential species on the planet, causing significant global warming and other changes to land, environment, water, organisms and the atmosphere.*’⁴
- And I haven’t even mentioned the impact of the internet and of Artificial Intelligence, at once both wondrous and woeful.

Yet despite that catalogue, today one can sometimes wonder if any of those eras was quite like this one. Something at the moment feels as bad as any of those. Exposed to the news from around the world around the clock, one can feel as if everywhere is in turmoil – the ‘chaos and confusion’ brought to life at the heart of Eric Idle’s spoof oratorio, ‘Not the Messiah’. With tempers frayed, governments parlous, and nations at war, many people acknowledge a heaviness in the pit of the stomach, which is less to do with our own circumstances being appalling – often they aren’t, though for people in places of

¹ cf the final line of *Two loves* (1894), a poem by Lord Alfred Douglas (1870-1945): ‘Have thy will, I am the Love that dare not speak its name.’

² Keys, Barbara *World politics explainer: the Twin Tower Bombings (9/11)* An article in *The Conversation*, published 4th October 2018 Available at <https://theconversation.com/world-politics-explainer-the-twin-tower-bombings-9-11-101443>; accessed 21st December 2024

³ Available at <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/news/2018/september/the-financial-crisis-ten-years-on>; accessed 21st December 2024

⁴ Available at https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/what-is-the-anthropocene.html?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAiA65m7BhAwEiwAAgu4JOi1u0vWUrcIKfyvefg7POCdGx2Yk2bp5fwHrxa189Df29Xqnp-zhhoCxgIQAvD_BwE; accessed 21st December 2024

humanitarian crisis they are. No, it's more to do with the cumulative effect of one piece of concerning news after another.

At the same time, leadership is a topic of rigorous debate. Who's going to lead us out of all this?

Let it be known, in academia, the arts, civil service, commerce, education, the emergency services, many exercise sound and dedicated leadership that is effective and fruitful, just as they do in homemaking, industry, politics, sport, vocations, and volunteering. And lest you fear that I made any one of those any more important than the other, they were simply in alphabetical order, for they all matter; they all make society what it is.

But even as so many offer such stellar leadership in so many contexts, leadership's coin has another side. It's hard. Much is unrecognisable from a generation ago; former convictions upon which we used to base so much are sucked into in a maelstrom of review – it's as if the very tectonic plates of what we believe and hold to are shifting; challenges are great; resources – at least in some places - are limited; followers of integrity cannot be assumed; critics are emboldened; and mistakes are treated mercilessly.

With so much to dissuade people from taking leadership on, or to require them to give it up, the paucity and poverty of its supply is hardly surprising. Society's leadership crisis is existential and exacerbates everything else. We look around us, in the church and in the world and wonder who we can respect or trust; who can we confidently follow?

So, this Advent, marked by greyness and shadows, by insecurity and uncertainty, are there words of hope that can be proclaimed to and by people of Christian faith, by those who live their lives trusting God's providence and grace?

Well, there's the writer to the Hebrews assuring us that it's about Jesus Christ: 'we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.' And thanks be to God that that *is* the Advent message, just as it will be the Christmas one, too. Mary's Child, coming once upon a time, and promising to come again, hope of the world. Saviour, Redeemer, Putter-right, however we prefer to understand him.

At the same time, I find a complementary word in what we heard from the prophecy of Micah, too – another strand of thought that speaks into our vexed and vexing world. This Advent 2024, Micah's awakening us not just to the role of the Christ-child but to the role of those who *trust* the Christ-child, and whose *model* is the Christ child. You see, Jesus' forebear is David, the mighty monarch of the most modest origins. He came from Bethlehem, an insignificant backwater. The sort of place teased in Radio 4's *Mark Steele's in Town*, or that Jack Dee would mock at the start of *I'm sorry I haven't a clue*.

And it's not just the town of Jesus' birth that's without distinction. Stable or cave, (believe what you will), there was no room at the inn, so we're given this image of Jesus's entirely undistinguished beginning. Heaven and earth can't contain him, but born to do God's saving work, he's at home in a manger. He's made to be nothing, in order to offer everything.

And you know, 'twas ever this. Time and again God uses the least likely to do the most necessary: Moses to bring the people from slavery; a girl named Mary to bear a son and name him Jesus; a boy with five loaves and two fishes, to feed five thousand; Malala Yousafzai, who, in Taliban-ruled Pakistan, 'spoke out publicly on behalf of girls and [their] right to learn'.⁵ And if that's how God gave Godself into the world as it was then, what might God ask of the Church giving God into the world as it is now?

In this world that's so profoundly hungry for hope, might the point be that just as we trust Jesus as the Saviour who was cradled in a manger, nailed to a cross, and sprang from a tomb, so our hope is rooted in a fresh commitment to the Church being not a bubble for the privileged, but a voice for the underprivileged; not a social club but a vehicle and voice for God's grace, which encourages faith,

⁵ From *Malala's Story*, on the website of Malala Yousafzai (1997-) Available at <https://malala.org/malalas-story>; accessed 22nd December 2024

models following, and points, points, points always to the one whose light shines on in a darkness that cannot put it out.

I have recently been reading Alfred, Lord Tennyson's long poem *In memoriam*. You might be grateful I am not going to read all of its 131 verses, but it begins where I would like to end. In Advent, as we make our journey with Mary towards Jesus Christ, these strike me as words about light's hope.

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,
Believing where we cannot prove;...

Thou wilt not leave us in the dust:
Thou madest man, he knows not why,
He thinks he was not made to die;
And thou hast made him: thou art just....

Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be:
They are but broken lights of thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they.

We have but faith: we cannot know;
For knowledge is of things we see
And yet we trust it comes from thee,
A beam in darkness: let it grow.

Let knowledge grow from more to more,
But more of reverence in us dwell;
That mind and soul, according well,
May make one music as before,

But vaster. We are fools and slight;
We mock thee when we do not fear:
But help thy foolish ones to bear;
Help thy vain worlds to bear thy light.⁶

May it be so, even as we ponder the ultimate hope, 'Now comes the Saviour of the nations'.

[The organist plays J. S. Bach's *Rhapsody* BWV 659, based upon the melody of Luther's Christmas hymn, *Von himel hoch da kom ich her*, Now comes the Saviour of the nations.]

N. P. Uden
22nd December 2024

⁶ Tennyson, Alfred Lord 1809-92 *Prologue to In memoriam AHH* (1850)