



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 27th November 2022
Reading: Isaiah 2.1-5; Romans 13.11-14; Matthew 24.36-44

The church does not exist in a vacuum. Jesus came into the world as it was, and our vocation is to proclaim the good news of Jesus in a world as it is.

So, Advent Sunday 2022 dawns upon a world and individuals' lives that are shaped by specific things. This week, I have seen recent graduates celebrating, I have planned a wedding with a couple brimming with quiet joy and professional potential, and, with some of you, I have been part of the interfaith gathering that saw Bahá'í, Christian, Jewish and Moslem people in an enriching encounter of mutual discovery.

Alongside such precious moments of promise, there is a war in Europe inflicting personal tragedy and global instability, a pandemic that will not go away – and this week we also remember the thirty-eight million living with HIV, a climate crisis that some get, but too many of us don't, and financial circumstances so challenging that millions are adversely affected.

On top of all that, there are the personal concerns we all face – we do not know what is going on behind most front doors, but this week alone I have sat with people dying, people bereaved, people so bruised by their work experience that they are contemplating early retirement at serious financial cost, people who feel hope has abandoned them.

And into this world we sing *O come, O come Immanuel*. Somehow, the haunting tune mingles our confidence with our pleading.

There are so many hard and harsh situations that seeking an answer in 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild' seems neither relevant nor credible. It feels as if we need something more rugged and robust, more resilient, and reliable. Might it be that the end of today's Gospel reading offers us a surprisingly helpful parable?

'...if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.' Matthew 24.43f (NRSV)

When urging us to be ready for God's continuing intervention in this shadowy world, Matthew records Jesus using the example of a robbery. The parable suggests that just as we must be vigilant in case an uninvited thief arrives, so we must be awake to the unpredictable involvement of God in the realities of the here and now. It is not a quaint or sentimental image – any more than the Cross is – but maybe its ruggedness is precisely what makes it robust enough to be taken seriously in today's disturbing world. Today's reading spoke of the householder needing to stay awake so that their house isn't 'broken into', and I am wondering whether that might not be a really helpful phrase to focus upon. The word translated as 'broken into' includes the idea of 'digging through', or 'tunnelling'.

There's a secrecy, invisibility and mystery about tunnel digging. I think of two of my favourite films of an earlier era, *The Wooden Horse* (1950) and *The Great Escape* (1963). Second World War captives in Stalag Luft III plot how to get out of the prisoner of war camp that held Allied personnel at Sagen, in a far eastern territory of Germany that is now back in Poland. Interestingly, they are both war films that are less about the violence in international conflict and more about the freedom from captivity for which they strive. The internees plot

their exit in intricate detail, and execute the excavation of their escape route – a tunnel - with daring determination. It's work that's unglamorous, risky, sacrificial, costly and, ultimately, liberating.

Could tunnelling be a helpful, if novel, way of understanding the incarnation? – that in the unobtrusive birth of a child in a cave, in itinerant ministry with nowhere to lay his head, in his hideous crucifixion with no-one to rescue him, and in his abandoning of the tomb because he didn't need a place for the dead, we see God tunnelling into the world's consciousness? And I wonder whether this offers an interesting way to conceive of how it is that God continues to engage with today's world? Demonstrably, God is not obvious or transparent today in the sense that there are unmistakable posts on the divine Instagram account or website. Nor does God rather more traditionally send post cards. The mysteriousness of God is undeniable, otherwise more of us would ally ourselves with God. There is a secrecy, invisibility and mystery about how God operates. And maybe that is why one of the crucial elements of a life of faith is being vigilant ... willing doggedly to seek God, and open to finding God in the unexpected.

I rather like the idea that God is a tunnel digger, beavering away underneath us, whilst we are unaware, only to appear with liberating power when we least expect it. And as Advent begins, might the image of a tunnelling God intimate something about God's ingenuity, determination, even subversion in their commitment to come amongst us? It's why we need to be awake.

We need to be awake in order not to miss what God is doing – to be caught up in the 'great escape' that God wills and enables. After all, the shepherds had to be ready to be seized by that choir of angels pointing them to Bethlehem, and the Magi had to be willing to go out of their way in search for the improbable amidst the unlikely. My sense is that the tunnelling God can be as inscrutable as the eponymous hero in a 'where's Wally?' puzzle book, but that actually the evidence of divine genius, power and grace *is* all around us, if only we will seek it out. It's there in the natural world, in humanity, and in the Word and Sacraments whenever we expose ourselves to them. The message really isn't that God has had God's day, but, just as we sang, that in order to perceive it we need to '*Wake up*'.

Moreover, if the activity of the God who is tunnelling their way into our world and into our consciousness is all around us, it seems to me that the person of faith will not only look for it, but also be willing to be part of it. Dr Rowan Williams has famously described Christian mission as 'looking for what God is doing and joining in'. It's not that God needs that for God's purposes to be fulfilled, but that we need to join in order for *our* purpose to be fulfilled, as those made to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

There are a million ways to join in what God is doing. This Advent, the elders have asked me to put before you just one, the chance to assist vulnerable families in Cambridge this Christmas. That may commend itself to you, but perhaps something else has. I don't think it matters what it is, provided that we are ready and willing so to walk in the light of the Lord ourselves that the tunnelling God emerges with light to shine in this world for its rescuing and renewing.

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