

Advent 1 Year A 1st Dec 2019.

Matthew 24:36-44

Contemplatio

This the first Sunday of Advent – only four shopping Sundays before Christmas.

Advent comes from the Latin word meaning to WAIT. We wait for the Christ to come – we remember waiting for the Jesus to be born in Bethlehem – and we wait now for signs of Christ's appearing in our world today – to bring peace. In the Nicene Creed we say, 'We look for his coming again', and given that Christ can only ever appear in this present moment, how might we recognise his appearing in this moment, even in this particular gathering around this bread and wine – both of which are called the Body of Christ.

The context in which we wait is an often violence one. The American Quaker, Parker J Palmer, writes how we live in a 'the Tragic Gap'. We are located between the world as it is (often violent) and the world which God is calling into being in Christ's image.

This tragic gap is reflected in this puzzling and quite violent passage, delivered by Jesus just before he is killed. Most biblical scholars are in agreement that the contextual background to today's Gospel passage is the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in 70AD. The compelling question for the first century Jewish community was 'how could God possibly allow this to happen'.

Just like the people of New York on Sept 11, 1001 asking, "how could this be happening"?

Just like the people of Iraq, as the bombs fell, "how could this be happening?"

In the nature of indiscriminate killing by an invading army, some people in the fields were struck down and others were left alone, or perhaps survived by hiding in a barn – one woman grinding meal is taken (a slightly softer way of saying she was raped by soldiers, while her friend escapes. Just like in the collapse of the World Trade Centres, some people asked, – "why did I survive while my work colleagues died". Why was it that I missed the train to work that morning, and so arrived late enough to miss being killed. And just like in Iraq, or Syria or Afghanistan, parents are left asking – "why did my child die in that bombing raid, and my neighbour's child survive?"

Whenever this section of the Gospel was written, either in hindsight, or before the event, the authors were reading the signs of the times. The storm that culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD had been brewing for a long time, Just thirty years earlier, not long after the Christ's crucifixion, the Roman Emperor Gaius Caligula tried to place a huge statue of himself in the temple. He did this to deliberately offend the Jews. In the end he was assassinated before he could carry out his plan, but had he done so, the events of AD70 would have shifted 30 years earlier because there would have been a Jewish revolt. The authors of Matthew's Gospel are reminded of a similar atrocity – committed by an Emperor called Antiochus iv Epiphanes, King of the Syrian Greeks, who sacked the temple nearly 200 years before that, in [167BC] which is alluded to in the Prophet Daniel as the "desolating sacrilege" [Matthew 24:15 and Daniel 9:27].

Jesus is a very grounded realist. He warns those that would follow him, "*because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold*" [24:12]. It is not God's love which has grown cold, but humanity's. Faith is always a rekindling of Love by the Holy Spirit in the midst of darkness.

Where is God in the midst of war and suffering? God is both hanging on a cross, AND God is raised and God is sending God's reconciling Spirit amongst us – a Spirit which will not dominate over our free will, but will love us into a new kind of existence.

And so we continue to **wait** patiently for the coming of God's kingdom. A central part of love is **waiting**. It's the nature of love that we can't always get our own way – we can't control everything, especially other people. The season of Advent reminds us of the centrality of patient waiting in love. Waiting with God and for God. So I'll finish with this little quote from Gertrude Nelson (*to dance with God: Family ritual and community celebration, 1986*):

"It is Advent and we are a people, pregnant. Pregnant and waiting. We long for the God/Man to be born, and this waiting is hard. Our whole life is spent, one way or another, in waiting. Information puts us on hold and fills our waiting ear with thin, irritating music. Our order hasn't come in yet. The elevator must be stuck. Our spouse is late. Will the snow ever melt, the rain ever stop, the paint ever dry? Will anyone ever understand? Will I ever change? Life is a series of hopes, and waitings, and half-fulfillments. With grace and increasing patience and understanding of this human condition of constantly unsatisfied desire, we wait on our incompleting salvation [and yet a salvation which is breaking through to us even in this very present moment]".

Intercessions

Lord Jesus,
born in pain, struggling towards life,
fighting for breath;
born in shame,
born to the threat of Herod's sword;
fleeing to another country, another home;
wrapped in a young girl's love,
placed in a borrowed bed;
We pray for those we know and love;
for all who suffer pain
of body or anguish of mind;
for all who struggle to live,
to live well, to live better;
for all who burn with shame,
for all who face threat and danger,
We pray to you, O God:
Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.