

Advent Clergy retreat 2017

Address 1 - Bishop Richard



We have arrived. I don't know in what state of mind and with what expectations you have come. The deal goes like this: If you get bored with me, want a rest from me and can find recreation elsewhere, you must feel free to take it; the reverse is not an option.

But we have arrived. Journeys can be tiresome and one must always allow for the unexpected as this, perhaps familiar, story illustrates. A couple decide to take a mid-winter break in the Canary Islands – but being a hard-working, driven clergy couple, they can't quite get their schedules to fit.

So the husband flies down a day earlier and books into a hotel. Once settled in he decides to email his wife. Unfortunately, (like some of us), he doesn't quite get the address letter perfect – but unaware of this, he sends it – and it goes.

Somewhere else, a widow has just returned from her husband's funeral. She tells her son that she wants to catch up on the messages of condolence and goes to her computer. Some moments later, there is shriek and her son runs in to discover the following message on the screen:

To: my loving wife
Subject: I have arrived

You will be surprised to hear from me. I have just checked in. So I thought I'd let you know that I am feeling good but missing you. However, all is ready for your arrival tomorrow and I look forward to seeing you very soon. Hope your journey is as uneventful as mine.

PS Uncomfortably hot down here!

A slightly flippant introduction, I'm afraid, to the rather more serious traditional Advent themes of death, judgement, heaven and hell. These days they seem to jar in an uncomfortably intrusive way to the pre-Christmas festivities the world has already started celebrating. So it may surprise you to learn that death features strongly in two albums now being released by 1990s bands REM and U2. *Automatic for the People*, REM's mordant, reflective 18 million-selling masterpiece, which cemented their status as "the acceptable edge of the unacceptable" is being reissued for its 25th anniversary.

Band member Michael Stipe confirms that the album was indeed about death. "My grandparents were dying, I was taking care of a sick dog and the 1980s were f***ed up". Aids took out an entire community; I looked at those three things and became very fearful of death..... Situations fed into it. We were recording in New

Orleans while Brad Pitt was down there shooting *Interview with the Vampire* which is about death bringing eternal life."

"Now it seems strange to me" says Peter Buck, another band member: "It is one thing to accept life's passing in your eighties, quite another in your late twenties." An album concerned for the most part with death, - by the laws of science, or at least pop music, should never have got so big in the first place. But then, we might reflect, the most used form of Christian song is the Psalms, of which the most common form is lament psalmody - which stand in contrast with, and even rebuke to any modern book (or overheads) of hymnody.

Following this seasonal Advent flavour, the new U2 album, *Songs of Experience*, due out on the 1st December is also "death obsessed" but nonetheless "it's a cracker" says the *Sunday Times* reviewer who recently interviewed Bono: "Everyone has a brush with mortality" says Bono "I'm going to look at mortality and how it affects the way I see my family, friends and death."

To this end, a striking line in the track *Lights of Home* - "Oh Jesus, if I'm still your friend" is hard to ignore. Did Bono's brush with death in a serious bicycle crash in 2014, followed by the death of close friends including David Bowie and Leonard Cohen - lead him from God? "I felt my faith go out of reach. Belief is preposterous, but I have it, and I'm experiencing fear! It was new, and I realised I don't want to die. I want to spend more time with my kids. There are songs I want to write, stuff I can be useful for. Then, when I admitted I was afraid, my faith returned."

This is serious stuff of Advent. To prevent us from slipping into a self-delusional world of the wrong construct, we need to admit to our fears and uncertainties. That means asking questions, difficult questions to which it will take time and persistence and above all, courage, to find the answers. That's what we should be doing in Advent if we are to be ready for Christ at Christmas.

Asking questions takes courage because they open up a future we cannot control. There is the daring personal courage of the question "Why are you so angry with me?" There are those questions, often not actually voiced, which threaten our settled pattern of life "Is it time to stop hosting the family Christmas?" Or "Is the useful life of this group or organisation I have been so committed to coming to an end?" Or "Is it time to move, to break old ties?" Or "Is it time to retire?" Or "Has the time come to start a new group or travel a different path?" Even if the answer is "no", the question can never be unasked.

So the bigger, sometimes apparently hopeless questions, such as "What is a good way of engaging the disaffected, disengaged, virtually uneducated and unskilled young people" takes courage. It takes courage to keep on asking these questions because the door is then opened, yet again, to compassion and anger which cannot necessarily find satisfaction in action or any clear conclusion.

That's the trouble with questions. No wonder the old advice to those entering the armed forces or a new job or even school was to keep your head down, and ask no questions.

But there are deeper human questions which can be even more disturbing – the basic questions about purpose and meaning to our brief lives here on this earth. There is that desperately hard question as to why evil so often triumphs and the why the good suffer. There is the cry from the heart “Has the life of a person like me any real value?”

However, I suppose the most frightening question of all is “Does anything really matter?” Allowing for the real possibility that life has no ultimate meaning - that it makes no real difference what we have done or how we have lived – well, that takes real courage. These last questions touch the heart of human life and are therefore common ground for brave people of all faiths and none.

So what about some of the answers? Well that, of course, depends on who is giving the answers. Religious people believe that God has the answers but for that to have much meaning, the next question has to be: “What kind of God do you believe in and live your life in relation to?” This is because those of us who belong to a faith community share an understanding of God. And that understanding shapes the way we live and how we answer all the other important questions of life.

For us, as Christians, we believe that God gives us answers to the meaning and purpose of human life in the Bible and, in particular, in Jesus. The whole Bible, Old and New Testaments, tells the story of God’s people struggling to find God’s answers to life’s questions. The annoying difficulty is that the Jesus we meet in the New Testament, and actually the God we meet in the Bible as a whole, seem to prefer asking - rather than answering - questions. As someone neatly put it: “God does not answer our questions. He questions our answers.”

Jesus seems to have preferred questions to answers. He questions us, presses us to judge for ourselves, then questions our answers. The story of the Good Samaritan – and who was neighbour to the man who fell among thieves? To the man who had been disabled for 37 years – do you want to be healed? To the man possessed by so many evil spirits – what is your name? To the disciples faced with a hungry crowd – how many loaves do you have? To Peter – and who do you say that I am? To Mary on Easter morning – why are weeping? Who are you looking for?

And some of the answers to what constitutes a meaningful human life are hard to accept: “love your enemies and bless those who curse you” – “forgive not seven times but seventy times seven” – “take up your cross and follow me”.

Each time we find a resting place, with an understanding of his teaching which we can just about manage to live by, Jesus questions our answers and seeks to move us on again into more uncharted territory where there are no clear answers. Exhausting business, this – no wonder so many Christians prefer to stagnate in an infantile faith state; how often we fall into the trap feeding them with simple, inadequate answers.

Wrestling with the questions of today and waiting on God with open and empty hands are essential if we are to catch a glimpse of God’s tomorrow. Wrestling implies a tough, but close, encounter which comes from bringing difficult and not sanitised questions. Remember Jacob who, having deceived his father and cheated his brother, has fled with his life in ruins, he wrestles for meaning with –

was it a person, an angel, or God himself. Well he got a blessing from God, but, note, no answers; he simply receives a limp.

But there is an important ingredient, which I have missed out thus far. I do not know whether to call it passion or faith – possibly it should be called a passionate faith. One of our mistakes, bedded perhaps in the way we are trained for ministry, is to think that Jesus asks us only intellectual questions. It may get you a shiny degree, a doctorate perhaps, and a nice line in your c/v. But there is no risk or passionate wrestling in that.

“And who do you say that I am?” When Jesus put that question to his disciples, it elicited from Peter a passionate response: “You are Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus did not praise him for his answer, as though it the question had been part of a catechism, but says it had been given to him by God.

How stubbornly do we believe that there is a God who has the answers and how much do we want to find those answers? How desperate are we to find Jesus - meet Jesus – to make him show us the right and meaningful way to live, the way of peace and justice, the meaning of grief and disappointment, the kind of church he is calling us to be in this present day?

The Advent call is not for the satisfied and the contented; it is for those who hunger and thirst. It is for such that the Advent call is directed. It is for such that Jesus knocks. We say that our deliverance, the deliverance of all, is drawing near. Do we hear it? There is that seasonal knock on the door. Christ seeks, again, to break his way through to us, through all the heart’s rubble and stoniness that is there. It doesn’t happen quickly, but it comes. Christ breaks his way through to us, to our hearts. Hearts that become hard can soften if we want it.

Jesus calls us, even in these busy days when we are in the weeks of waiting for Christmas and Christ says he is coming. He is coming to rescue us from the business and preoccupations of our existence, from the prisons of our own construct, from the need for affirmation that we are alright, from anxieties, from guilt, from fear, from loneliness.

Do you want to be delivered? This is the only really important and decisive question that Advent poses for us. Does there burn within us some lingering longing to know what deliverance really means? Think about ourselves. Do we not need to be freed from the sorrow and anguish that inhabit our souls? Deliverance is near us, not just others. Advent is especially for us who say we are too busy, preferring to take refuge in our service of others. The Father says to his son: Look up, don’t turn your eyes to the ground, look at me I am your father ...” that is what the words in the Gospel mean.

In Luke’s Gospel, Chapter 21 verses 25-28, the coming of the Son of Man is foretold and we are given a message of great hope and comfort: “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

This verse makes two powerful demands: Look up. Raise your head. Advent makes us see things differently and more clearly. Stand up, look up: our view is too much

drawn towards the earth, fixed upon the superficial energy of ceaseless activity that reassures us we have a purpose in saving the Church.

When you look up, things look quite different from what you see day by day; raise your head and you become more real, far greater and more powerful. Ah, if only it were true, you may sigh. Be patient – Advent is a season of waiting. Wait and something quite new will come over you – God will come. God draws near to human souls and enters into them. He is at work in us – if we would only take time to notice. We need take no action, simply let Christ enter in. Jesus comes and takes up his home with you. Do not let Advent to pass you by and remain unmoved

Pray, during this retreat, that you may not be deaf to the Advent call. Jesus our Saviour comes near whether we know it or not. This retreat is offered so that we may find our desire to welcome him with a passionate faith.

So let us pray:

Father, during this day of Retreat
help me to experience
what was there from the beginning;
to hear, to see it with my own eyes,
to look upon it and feel it with my own hands;
so that I can tell of it powerfully
to all the persons to whom you send me
to make my theme
in all my life and words and actions
the Word of Life.
Make this life visible to me
so that I may see it
and give my own testimony of it
declaring the eternal life,
which dwelt in you, Father,
made visible to me,
so that I may share it with others,
the life we share with you, Father
and your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.