



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Sunday, November 29, 2020

Scripture Passages: Isaiah 64: 1-9 & Mark 13:24-37

+ In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

As you may or may not know – I have a penchant for poetry. And these past months some words that keep coming to me over and over again are those of John Donne – 17th century priest and poet. “Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone.” They come from a poem called *An Anatomie of the World*. He wrote those words four hundred years ago to express his confusion as his worldview was being deeply challenged by philosophical and scientific discovery – a new world was being born and he was ambivalent about it. And it seems that we are in the midst of similar paradigmatic change in our time too. Our world pre-pandemic seems a distant memory now and a new world is emerging.

2020 must be a banner year for memes and articles expressing the bewilderment of the disconnect with reality that seems to have us floating, untethered from our cultural norms. In fact, it seems to be the theme of the new paradigm of these days. It’s everywhere – in the small things and the large.

It’s rather like an unlikely phenomenon which has captured the popular cultural imagination for a few years now: I wonder if you’re all watching it too? It is the content, complexity and sacrifice of the institution of the monarchy embodied in the Netflix hit: *The Crown*. It is not – as we might expect simply the personal story of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, rather it is the story – the biography really, of *The Crown* – and the story of her life as it bisects with the Crown it is her privilege, duty and burden to wear.

I am pretty fascinated by both the programme and by the fact that it is so popular. Now being a good Anglican, *I’ve* always respected the monarchy, deeply though that admiration, un-dulled, has been tempered a bit by the reality of monarchy in a postmodern, digital world; a world that seems unable to accommodate the mystery of an hereditary institution. You might not immediately think that it would be so very fascinating in a time when republicanism seems to be the fashion, but it really is.

It's beautifully shot, it's amusing but I believe it's real attraction is that it's subject matter is deeply counter cultural.

It's counter cultural because it depicts a public figure committing to and embodying servant leadership: *sacrificing* individuality, personal preference, personality to some degree, for duty, for country, for the Crown and very importantly to her, *for* God. It is about a woman who lives quite consciously and purposefully, out of step with this world. This seems to be fascinating to our society which lives, it seems, more and more not only in indifference but in active opposition to these seemingly arcane values.

But I believe it is this sense of selflessness, this disjunction with what *is*, that is so very fascinating to our society: the selflessness that the sovereign is meant to embody. Of course that selflessness is modeled upon an idea of *Christian* monarchy. There is a whole history and tradition of sacred kingship in the Old Testament which was then further built upon by Jesus speaking about the kingdom of God – all that kingdom talk that we've been hearing in these last weeks of the church year.

You see there is, if you like, an agreement embodied in the person of the sovereign of the covenant between the people and God that the monarchy is meant to be the mirror image of God's covenant with his chosen people. Of Christ's covenant with humanity – one in which he promised himself in love and sacrifice for us.

And it has to be admitted that it's hard to recall a time in recent history, in which we've needed that message that the church universal proclaims about Jesus Christ so very much.

After all these days we could be forgiven for feeling that the powers and principalities were gaining: can it be that we are beginning to realize that destructive individualism, a spirit of personal exceptionalism, a spirit of me-first – not us-first has not served us and our common humanity well? Can it be that we have truly realized that we are all in this pandemic together? Perhaps we are beginning to see that our pre-pandemic attitudes were diametrically opposed to the message of sacrificial, self-offering love that we see lived out in Jesus. And maybe there is hope that we will live differently when it is all over – with this selflessness before us as an example. That would be a good kind of disconnect with what was.

And maybe Advent is a good time for us to think about that.

Because the birth of a saviour of humankind – *that* event is about someone who embodied profound disconnection. But *this* break with the way things *are* is actually *good* news.

The scriptures tell us that for those who follow Jesus Christ, a disconnect with what is, is to be sought; to be *actively* sought.

I mean, we're supposed to be different, aren't we? Followers of Jesus are called to live differently than those around us. We are called to behave differently. We are called to approach family, friendships and careers differently. We are called to engage with money, relationships and power differently. We're called even to tell time differently!

It's not new, this sense of disconnection. And perhaps Christians have always felt it as our birthright in this world. Very early on in the life of the church, Christians made their own calendar that helps us to this day have a different rhythm of life and reminds us of the gospel. When we "tell time" according to this calendar, it can become a powerful tool of Christian discipleship but it is also a way to unhook with this world.

So, while the rest of the world gets their retail on, Christians try to unplug and try and do this *different* thing. We get out the beautiful sarum blue - the same Advent blue which I am told signifies hope - as we get out our blue vestments and frontals, and as we read lessons full of warnings to be ready for the second coming of Jesus, we remind ourselves that just as we had no idea when and how God would send us a solution to our disorder and disconnection the first time, the Lord will do it again. And that very action will be a willful disconnect in itself. We don't know precisely when it will be - but we do know that it will be in *God's* own time - in *God's* own way for *God's* ways are not our ways. And so we enter an intentional time of introspection and preparation and examination: a time to mull over our commitment to the One who is coming: Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Saviour of the world.

And I think it's in that very incongruity that we are reminded of who we are and to whom we belong. I think that this disjunction is very important.

Because at our best, when we really inhabit our own language and worldview, we see that we don't fit - and we are reminded that as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are not to be conformed to this world. Instead, we are to be transformed by the good news of God in Jesus Christ. And we are to be the hearts and hands of that same Jesus Christ and to do our best to work for transformation in this world: to work toward loving each other as we would be loved.

The scale of such an effort - to love all people as ourselves is huge. It may seem at times, given our propensity to sin and violence and to be dishonest with *ourselves*, never mind our neighbour, to be near impossible. Our failure to fulfill this primary directive is so very apparent.

But that is exactly the story that this world tells. That is a story that is bereft - empty - of the hope of putting on Christ. That story would have us believe that violence and poverty and prejudice is the only reality.

To be a Christian though, is to be an eternal optimist but not in a way that is *reality-denying*.

It is however, in a real sense, *world-denying* because we are called to believe in the apocalyptic dream of a world in which the nations could and “**shall** beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; [where] nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more”

It is to believe that with the Grace of God we *can* “lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light.” They say we are fools to hope for the best in humanity when only the worst is on display. To hope for love when only hate is evident. But to quote the late, great Leonard Cohen, “There is a crack in everything. It’s how the light gets in.”

To walk in the light of the Lord is what we are called to do always and ever in preparation for the coming of God’s kingdom as an example to the world – to see the world differently – to dream that it *could* change – and that we can and should be the agents of that change – as believers in the One who is coming.

And it is just this kind of commitment that Jesus urges us to in the Gospel this morning. We hear him predicting uncertain times. “For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴²Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”

But, contrary to what we might think, Jesus was not trying to frighten his disciples. Actually he was encouraging them to persevere in faith because these events would be a signal that the kingdom of God was at hand. “Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Jesus was urging the disciples and us, to take a God- perspective in our daily lives. He asks us to *live true* to our Christian story as the paradigm for life. You see, the focus of this Gospel passage is on preparation and anticipation for the reality-altering God-connection we have in Jesus Christ.

And so the Gospel bids us not just to wait, but to be prepared. *Such* good advice this year. You know, perhaps this year when we are forced to have a simpler, quieter Advent and Christmas, we’ll be able to prepare for Christ’s coming again with more attention, more intentionality.

The counter cultural, Christian-time season of Advent asks us to turn to Jesus in order to learn how to live in this present time--how to wait, how to stay alert, how to live lives which reflect this light in preparation for the moment when we

will be needed to bring creation to completion - because, as the people of God, for better or worse, we are the ones who bear Christ's hope for the world.

Today Christians around the world light the first candle in our journey through the darkness of Advent, we are reminded again with the blessed disconnect of a God's-eye view of both the beautiful and the profoundly difficult of this world. We are specially called again on this day to remember that it *has been* redeemed by Jesus, the light of the world. And we are called to wait - and *work and be ready* for God's promise to be fulfilled. And it's in that light that we put our trust and our hope.

I don't know if it's age or maturity that has me thinking more and more through poetry – let's go with maturity - but the lines of a beautiful poem quoted by King George VI in his Christmas Day broadcast in 1939 seem so very appropriate and hopeful – this year as we begin a new Church year – and begin to look forward. It's by Minnie Louise Haskins and it's the only poem that she wrote that ever gained any popularity, but is it ever a good one and it seems such a good way to end today at the beginning of a new Church year:

"I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year,
"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."
And he replied, "Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the
hand of God.
That shall be to you better than light, and safer than a known way."

May that Almighty Hand guide and uphold us all this Advent and always.

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.