

**Sermon at Holy Trinity at the Advent Sunday Eucharist  
on 1 December 2019 at 10 am**

**Isaiah 2 v.1-5**

**Matthew 24 v.36-44**

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So as to preserve my liberal credentials I sometimes manage to read *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* all on the same day, in part to be open to a wide range of views, in part you understand, to find out what the opposition is thinking and saying. Last week I strayed even further and read a blog by a research analyst from the Institute of Economic Affairs entitled '*Why is there more intellectual freedom in Bucharest than Cambridge?*'. The author, a supporter of Brexit, had been welcomed to an academic conference in Bucharest to engage in a debate on the virtues and vices of the European Union with a German federalist, a strong supporter of the EU. The ensuing debate with the Romanian undergraduates had been intelligent and stimulating. A week later the author was preparing to talk to a student politics society at Cambridge University, and proposed the same topic. This was not accepted because it was thought to be too controversial, too uncomfortable. The society had indeed adopted a policy of no-platforming supporters of Brexit. How very depressing, not to be able to debate frankly and freely with those with whom we might disagree! Not only does it diminish the university experience, it also diminishes our society more widely.

I thought I had never been denied a platform to speak, but then I recollected the time some years ago when I was thwarted by political correctness. I had been asked to attend an all-day session on 'Religion and Belief Awareness' for the staff of Guildford Borough Council. It was the beginning of December. There were to be speakers from some of the major faith traditions, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and from the Humanists, and from an atheist. I had been invited to begin the day with a prayer for understanding and peace amongst people of all religions and faiths, and people who had no faith. At ten to ten, on the dot, I arrived at the Guildford Borough Council offices and was met by a senior Council officer. She explained that one of the speakers, the Jehovah's Witness representative, had withdrawn because he had been offended at the prospect of a Christian prayer. I was then told that it had been decided that instead of the prayer, the Mayor would lead us in a minute's silent reflection. The Mayor looked taken aback at this change of plan, and in the minute's silence I pondered how I had fallen at the first fence. We were at the beginning of Advent, and just as now, we were to prepare the way of the Lord, and to make his paths straight. I hadn't been able to do this, and it made me sad and momentarily angry.

This is increasingly a challenge throughout England. Yet one more step on the loosening of the bonds that make our society coherent.

Now I do want to make it clear that I value social diversity and our multi faith society, but at the same time we may regret the decline of a shared belief simply because of the weakening effect this has on us as a people, - but listen - a voice cries out 'prepare the way of the Lord!' What is at stake is more than social cohesion, important though that is, what is at stake is our receptiveness to the truth, to the presence of God amongst us, our Emmanuel, our God-with-us.

In many ways it's as if we are back in first century Palestine, or even with Isaiah and the Jewish exiles in Babylon. We live as members of a society that is yearning, - yearning for liberation from fear and anxiety, doubt and uncertainty, and yearning to live once again with a truth that will nourish us and will give us a deep peace, a sense of being fully grounded and secure.

In our God given nature, deep inside us all, there is a capacity to yearn, passionately, for what is precious, what is love, what is fine beyond compare. In our Advent season we enter a time of watching and waiting. Watching and waiting for the coming of the Christ, for what is of infinite value, precious above all other.

Advent is of course also a time of preparation, making Christmas puddings and Christmas cakes, and buying presents. Most importantly, with God's grace Advent is a time for hopeful preparation, preparation for the ever renewing presence of Christ in our lives.

Yet for some people and for some societies that seems to them to be an impossibility. Let me take you back to Romania and tell you a difficult story about my Romanian friends. Eleven years ago now, on a hot August evening in Bucharest, Anne and I were sitting talking with them in their little garden. It may have been the wine, but as the night darkened they revealed to us that the wife, who was a senior officer at a Romanian University, had been under investigation by the Students' Union and the University Council. In this investigation a file dating from the 1970s and compiled on her by the Securitate, the State Secret Police under the Ceausescu regime, had been examined and had revealed that she had been assigned a Securitate code name as one of their agents, and had been required to report on her husband's life in London, where he was a postgraduate student and where I had met him. Later investigations had also revealed that he had been betrayed to the Securitate by his closest friend, at the time of preparation for the Revolution thirty years ago this month in December 1989.

They both sadly acknowledged to us that they knew that further reading of the Securitate files on themselves and their family and friends would reveal an extended betrayal of trust, a betrayal of friendship, a betrayal of love.

Then the husband said something so desolate. He said,

'I fear our generation must pass away before our country can hope and trust again.'

I thought then at that moment, and I think every time I recall that conversation, that Christ came into the world to redeem such pain and anguish, and for those who wait and watch for the coming of Christ there is the promise of forgiveness, the promise of a renewal of trust, the promise of hope. Those far away friends in that far away country are yearning for a release from the sins and sorrows of the past.

They are yearning for the coming of all that is good to bless them and redeem them. Only Christ can calm that yearning.

And that yearning is not just in my two friends nor in one Balkan country. It is universal. It has entered the heart of our own country.

So what do we do?

We as Christians might feel an increasingly ignored minority in England, but we are being called by God to be a special witness of his truth. Think for a moment of the differences, and then the similarities between our situation and that faced by John the Baptist, that great prophet and herald of God's son. John was in the wilderness, not at the centre of power and sophistication, not in Jerusalem. We are very near to a world capital city, London. John was in the clothes of Elijah and recognised as a prophet; he lived on the margins of society, charismatic yet excluded. We live in the centre of English society, but at present our faith to a large extent is merely tolerated by that secular society, increasingly pushed to the margins. But John was also like a hinge, a hinge upon which the old world would swing open to reveal the new world of the word of our God, the word made flesh, the Emmanuel, the God-with-us. We too, by the grace of God, and by our witness, can be a hinge upon which the present world of secular judgement, secular ethics, secular vision swings open to reveal a new world of faith in Christ.

If any of us doubt the necessity for such public witness of our faith, could we for a moment reflect upon our immediate future? I do not truly understand the likely implications of our present financial and political situation, here in the United Kingdom, in Europe and in the wider world. But if English, Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish society creaks, and groans and cracks under the strains to come, then those of us who are called as baptised Christians to witness to the love of God need to be at the forefront, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit given us by Christ, to love and protect and serve others in times of such adversity.

Amen.