

King's College Chapel, Cambridge
Sermon for Advent Sunday
29 November 2015

given by The Revd Canon Chris Chivers
Principal, Westcott House

Over twenty-five years ago, I was teaching music at a girls' school – and living in a flat between two boarding houses – when I sank gratefully into my bed late one night only to be stirred forty-five minutes later by the sound of voices and what I thought must be the rustling of paper in my study opposite. As I was very sleepy I didn't react too quickly and before I knew it two figures were standing at the foot of my bed. Sitting bolt upright I somehow stammered out a sentence that is among the more ridiculous I've ever uttered – 'Excuse me, how may I help you!' But politeness obviously paid off as the two intruders swiftly sped down the stairs, out through the bathroom, and onto the roof of the neighbouring boarding house.

Jolted from my sleepiness I also sped down the stairs but too late to catch them – a job which the Cheltenham Constabulary undertook most nobly!

Returning to my study, I found a depressing scene with books and papers scattered all over the place. But then, amid the chaos, I saw a photograph I had mislaid – the only photograph I possess of my maternal grandfather who died long before my birth. I guess that I must have used it as a bookmark and that it was unknowingly unearthed by the intruders.

Anything that upsets our sleep pattern is unsettling, and a burglary of course is a very disturbing experience not least because by rifling through the personal contents of your home a burglar leaves you feeling that your humanity has somehow been invaded, even violated. Put the two together and it makes for a distressing combination. But this is the combination that our New Testament writers in fact offer us when they describe the coming of Christ. 'Out of your sleep, arise and wake', is St Paul's arresting injunction and hearing St Matthew's account of entry to Jerusalem, with his dramatic and violent overturning of the tables – think the whips in El Greco's famous depiction – merely points up the disturbing nature of the divine presence. Elsewhere, both writers beef up this image by suggesting that Christ's return as Judge will be like the visit of a thief in the night. What is conveyed has a pretty forceful, even a threatening edge. In the context of their day – when the end time seemed to be just around the corner – the image was of course a form of shock tactic. But in our own day, though the context has changed a good deal, the image has lost none of its arresting power; for we are living through events and circumstances that certainly have that end-time, apocalyptic feel to them. A world devastated by mass terrorism, ravaged by war, decimated by poverty and natural disaster: a world thoroughly haunted by anxiety and uncertainty. A world in fact not so very far away from that which the earliest Christian writers believed would herald the return of the Saviour. All of which would seem to be a rather foreboding – even depressing – place from which to begin our Advent journey to Bethlehem. And maybe that's right. Perhaps things are really that bleak. Certainly, I think, all of us are struggling to live with the upheaval and turmoil that has marked the events of the present century.

But maybe our cries of anger and frustration – which have understandably been an initial response to events that rob us of our security and stability, and to people who would rob us of our humanity and dignity – maybe these cries are actually soon to be answered and overcome by other cries, the cries we hear at the end of our Advent journey, as the God-child demands our absolute attention and love. Aren't these in fact precisely the sounds we most need to hear as we prepare to receive again the divine disturber this Advent? For though we feel utterly helpless in the face of events that steal from us our confidence in human living, the first cries of God incarnate are surely a supremely hopeful sign that vulnerability and despair are already being shared and overcome.

'To discover how to be truthful now ... living now ... loving now ... To discover how to be human now is the reason we follow the star' are the words that the poet WH Auden puts successively into the mouths of the magi in his oratorio, *For the time being*. 'To discover how to be human now ... 'Amid the ruins of our contemporary situation this is indeed the journey into which all of us are called. For as I discovered – when I sifted through the debris of my study – what in fact emerges from the wreckage is the long-lost photograph – the divine imprint and image of our genuine humanity – seen with new eyes as if for the first time. When we recognise and reverence this image of God within ourselves and in every single human soul, when we work tirelessly to counter injustice, prejudice, and oppression, then the divine thief who comes in the night will be doing his work. For he comes not to strip us naked or to rob us of our dignity, he actually comes to be stripped bare himself and to hang on a cross between two other thieves in order to bestow on us that most precious of all gifts. This is a renewed discovery, a wonder at being human now, and a renewed commitment to being human together as citizens of God's world.

A postscript. I feel that it would be unfair of me not to reveal to you the identity of my intruders – found to be two pupils from Cheltenham Boys College, who had seen the light – well, seen my study light – and suspected that this indicated the exciting prospect that what lay behind the curtains were Cheltenham Ladies. They were of course somewhat disappointed to be confronted by a male voice! But I'm sure there's a sermon in that too – probably the same sermon – follow the star and we will indeed discover humanity at the end of the road – but a rather different humanity, perhaps, from that which we expected. Thanks be to God.