

Sermon preached at King's College Chapel, Cambridge

December 1st 2019 – Advent Sunday

As every shop has been telling us since September, Christmas is coming. Christmas is indeed coming! But we can leave the goose to go on getting fat for a while, because we have another season to enjoy first – Advent.

I say 'enjoy'. The putting on of purple in church, and the traditional Advent themes of death, judgment, heaven and hell, may not immediately bring the word 'enjoy' to mind. I mean it in the richest sense. When we take Advent seriously, we have the chance to make good and beneficial use of the time in preparation for the feast of Christmas.

Like Lent, Advent is a time for deep and serious reflection. Unlike Lent, it's not so much about inward examination and penitence. It's more about pondering some very big themes, and how those themes matter in our lives, how they inform our lives. Death, judgment, heaven and hell. They can often be, as they say, like elephants in the room. Rather big, unwise to ignore, but polite not to mention. Some prefer to talk of hope, peace, love and joy. They have become the more user-friendly themes for Advent. A faith which didn't want to shout from the rooftops about hope, peace, love and joy would be a very shrivelled-up sort of faith. But without the underpinning of an understanding of those other themes, we would risk being built on sand.

So today let us think on Death. We are well aware of it here, just now. Only ten days ago we lost Stephen Cleobury. And the murders at London Bridge, with their Cambridge connection, weigh heavily.

One of the great, great privileges of being a priest is that you spend time with the dying. I've tasted this. I have spent time with two wonderful people as they have approached death. In both cases they knew what was coming, and faced it with a kind of realistic Christian confidence which was simply uplifting. I say 'realistic' because they were also uncomfortable and a little afraid. They were living with pain. And death is still death, the greatest unknown that we all know we have to meet. So they weren't just showing a blithe complacency. But they did have an underlying confidence in the mercy of God, the assurance of the mercy of God, which for both came from a long-held Christian faith.

For so many others, of course, death does not come so gently (not that the cancer one of those women had was remotely gentle). I've also taken the funeral of a man who was murdered in a homophobic attack. I've said a requiem mass for a young man who fell in front of a train in what was a tragic accident. More than once – and these were painful in a very sharp way – I have taken the funeral of a stillborn baby. At one of these only two of the two hundred people present were men: one was the 17-year-old father, carrying the tiny coffin. There were a lot of people in church at those services whose view of God was not very positive.

I can't begin to suggest a simple answer to such a complex web of experiences. We know from scripture, and especially the Psalms, that we do have a licence to say what we like to God – especially when we are grief-stricken. He is not just an impressive, impassive concept; nor is he the wilful manipulator of so many events which seem tragic, wasteful, appalling. He *is* the very

origin of our being and of all that is; but he is also the one who knows us better than we know ourselves, and the one with whom we can have the closest, most intense personal relationship. Including, of course, in our liturgies. The old rites of the Requiem and the Dirige (or Dirge) included psalms and passages from the Book of Job which were great outpourings of frustration, anger and confusion. Like this -

Your hands have made me, and fashioned me about, and yet now you destroy me....

So much of what we know about death – about particular deaths or about types of death which anger or upset us – so much of this is wrapped up in an even bigger mystery. That is, why a world created and sustained by a loving and all-powerful God can have so much that is horrible going on in it. There is no straightforward solution to this. One small part of it might be this: to ponder how much of what seems wrong or unnecessary or horrible is in fact part of how human society (how we!) have evolved and engaged with the world; how much of what seems wrong or unnecessary or horrible is part of the almost infinite complex which is made up of the consequences of human decisions and behaviour.

We must also believe that every single moment of pain or anguish is, in some vital sense, known by God himself. Not just known as a matter of fact, but known keenly. This is the nerve-system which runs through the whole of humanity, and which has its heart in the cross of Christ. The Christ who died in agony was God as well as man. I don't know a more powerful way of grasping this nerve-system of God's sharing in our pain than the story of the boy in the Nazi concentration camp. There was a lively, lovely boy of 12 or so who was the camp's favourite, and who was allowed much leeway even by the guards. One morning, though, all the inmates were lined up. In reprisal for some misdemeanour by others in the camp, the boy had been hung from a hook, in front of them all, dying. 'Where the hell is God now?' whispers one person. 'Hanging there', comes the answer.

So: God gives us the scope to make our world to a very significant extent. And He knows our pain and fear and knows it as keenly as we do. And we are allowed to rail at him in our agony and anger.

Ultimately we have to look at death in the light of what Christmas itself is about. The Incarnation, the coming among us of God-with-us, tells us something to which we must always return – that God loves us *so* much that he became human to redeem us. In doing so he demonstrated beyond all doubt that we are loved body and soul. The body matters, and so pain and death matter. They all matter so much that death turns out to be the gateway to the rest of life: frightening, probably painful, mysterious, and monumental – but the moment through which we pass into eternity, ready to see the full majesty of God's love and mercy, to see Jesus' arms stretched wide in smiling welcome. This has been my last sermon as Chaplain here; and that is the hope which sustains me.

Andrew Hammond