

Hymns: **169** “Come thou long expected Jesus”
 625 “Deep in the darkness a starlight is gleaming”
 179 “**You will hear the trumpet sound**”
 180 “O come, O come Emmanuel”

Readings: **Jeremiah 33:14-16**
 Luke 21:25-36

“THE INEVITABILITY OF PROGRESS?”

Dreadful things are happening. Cities are being destroyed. Nature is being ravished. Fear, distress, foreboding and confusion are to be found in every direction. These are dire times.

So what’s this all about? Is it

- Paris?
- Beirut?
- Baghdad?
- Bamako?
- The Sinai desert?

Or is it the low expectation of a binding agreement in the United Nations Conference taking place in Paris on the subject of carbon emissions and global warming?

Or might it be the canvassing for support for air strikes in Syria currently going on at a fervent pace?

I’ve often quoted the lines that I’m about to read – they come from a poem by W B Yeats called “The Second Coming”. They were written in 1919 just after the ravages of the First World War finally came to an end:

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack of all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

How prophetic can you get? I’ve always felt that Yeats had his finger on the pulse not only of his generation but on a world that hadn’t in his time been born. Yet I’ve never quoted the few lines with which this poem ends. They link the Second Coming (as per the title of the poem) of a so-called Saviour to the First Coming, and they send shivers down my back. Just listen:

*The darkness drops again but now I know,
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*

What an ugly thought. The nice and pleasant pictures we form in our minds around that first birth in the stable at Bethlehem overshadowed by the thoughts of a rough beast, fashioned by the nightmares that have occurred between the First and Second Coming.

The picture I began with – dreadful things happening, cities being destroyed, nature being ravished; fear, distress, foreboding, confusion on all hands – it may have sounded as if it had been written yesterday. It might have been lifted directly from this last week's newspapers. But it wasn't.

Yeats's poem was written after the conflagration of a World War. This morning's gospel passage was written just after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year AD70. And, hundreds of years before that, Jeremiah wrote at a time when Jerusalem had only recently been razed to the ground. As it was in the beginning, so it was in New Testament times, and has remained so through 20 centuries of stony sleep.

All those years of hard-heartedness, cruelty, disaster. In the face of such bleakness, such unremitting darkness, such a blanket of despair, we are told:

- to be vigilant;
- to keep alert;
- to watch and wait;
- to expect a better day;
- to anticipate a (faint) beam of light;
- to keep on our guard.

Why?

Why bother?

What good will all that watching and waiting do?

Isn't the game already lost?

Hasn't history already proved that?

Isn't all the hoping against hope we keep on urging ourselves to indulge in simply phoney?

At this point, as an item that might offer a little relief from this despairing narrative, I want to describe a television news item that I saw during the course of last week. It concerned the deadly gases emitted by all the food we throw away! We buy the food, we consume a little of it, we throw the rest away and, lo and behold, it comes

back threatening to kill us. You couldn't make it up could you? And to illustrate this process, they showed a simple picture. There it was, an oven-ready chicken that someone had thrown away. On screen viewers saw it rot, putrefy, collapse into a mucky soup of toxic juices. First the bird lost its colour, then its shape, then its substance – and all this was captured on one of those speeded-up camera systems. We saw something intended to sustain us turn into something that certainly disgusted me but would, according to the reporter, have done me a lot of harm if I'd ingested its fumes. The reporter's words remain in my ears; "keep watching," he urged. "Don't take your eyes off it. Can you see what's happening? Look."

We certainly didn't see the green, sprouting leaves of the fig tree mentioned in our gospel passage. This was not the harbinger of spring with its new life after the winter depredations that seemed to bring the clammy hand of death. This was just rotteness, foul poison, ugly putrefaction.

I've preached the watching and waiting sermon so many times. The first sermon I ever preached was on the text from Psalm 40: "I waited patiently for the Lord". And Advent is the season of waiting expectantly. But I fear we should not be too hopeful. We should be careful about what we wait for.

How long have we kidded ourselves that we were making progress? That science would deliver its own solutions to our never-ending problems? That history had its own upward thrust, filled with what the philosopher Hegel called "the phenomenology of the spirit". Secular philosophy has preached its doctrines for the last couple of hundred years. And they include such lofty themes as "the perfectibility of Man," and the inevitability of Progress for too long. We may have benefited from certain developments handed to us by the world of science. But it's time to say NO to the bullshit that they put out – the promise of some kind of magic solution for all our problems. It's time to recognise that those false and febrile optimisms are too often based on denial. And that it's not religion that constitutes an opiate for the people (à la Karl Marx) or an infantile illusion invented to help us cope with our fear of the dark (à la Sigmund Freud) – NO! That's what these secular ideologies, these materialistic representations are based on. It's time to return the compliment. It's they who are seducing and confusing people just as much as the world of religion. And the latest lying and deceiving promise is only too obviously apparent in the hedonistic, self-indulgent, programmes that surround the activity we call "shopping". The road to happiness, my friends, can never be formed between a starting point on Black Friday and destination on Cyber Monday. That's just a yellow brick road and, as we all know, they simply lead us over the rainbow where all we'll find is a Scarecrow without a brain, a Tin Man without a heart, and a Lion with no courage. Empty dreams. A little short-term solace with no lasting power.

But wait!

Hold back on this torrent of despair.

It risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Doesn't the Bible cling to a belief that better things *can* happen?

Doesn't the Good Book offer a glimmer of hope?

Yes it does. But it sounds that note in a clear-eyed way. It grounds and roots the hope it offers in a realistic understanding of human nature that's best summed up by St Paul:

All of us have sinned and we all fall short of the glory of God.

Only a recognition of that starting point can yield the possibility of hope. And those green shoots on the fig tree can still be seen though they may have morphed into their modern equivalents. They still, however, remain readily recognisable. Let me offer three such glimpses of hope now.

First, the Paris bombings. We've certainly seen plenty of red, white and blue around our public buildings and monuments. Three cheers for that. And we've heard the lusty singing of the Marseillaise with its famous (infamous?) words "Marchons... qu'un sang impur abreuve nos sillons (let's march on against all that threatens us until the blood of our impure opponents waters our fields). That's the spirit of those who pressed the panic button and push for military action, the dropping of bombs on Syria, the returning of like for like. Beyond these symbols lay the motto I've preferred the most. It's the motto that stands on the coat of arms of Paris. It reads: FLUCTUAT NEC MERGITUR which, being interpreted, means that "though it may be buffeted, it just doesn't sink". That's the spirit that's needed now. Resilience an essential ingredient in any understanding of hope.

And then there's the story of Pope Francis. He's become the first Pope to visit a war zone. They warned him against it. Their risk assessment suggested danger. But he was insistent. He was going to visit the Central African Republic come what may. Threatening even to drop in by parachute if there was no other means of getting there. Courage and a readiness to invest his very life in a scheme that might bring hope to others.

And then finally my visit to Bethany – a hostel for those convalescing from HIV/AIDS. It was in Bude in Cornwall and it was run by a Roman Catholic sister who had been a colleague of mine when we were both Chaplains at the Middlesex Hospital. That's where they established the first dedicated HIV/AIDS ward which Princess Diana came to inaugurate. We all remember that picture of her sitting on the bed holding the hand of an HIV/AIDS patient. My visit to the Bethany convalescent home took place on a day that happened to be my birthday. Somehow they discovered this fact and threw a party for me. A wonderful dinner. Lovely people. They sang happy birthday lustily. And they wished me many happy returns. Many happy returns! Six of the eight people who'd made that wish died before a year had passed. There were no returns of the day – happy or otherwise for them. But it didn't stop them expressing their wishes for a world and for a person whose life would extend beyond there's.

"Heaven and earth may pass away," said Jesus. "But my words, offering hope, will never pass away".

And so, armed with these illustrations of what might be, these little fragments of evidence about the stuff we are made of deep down, I refuse to succumb to the tidal wave of despair that's currently crashing over the world. As we lit one candle this morning as a beginning of our challenge to the enveloping darkness, I intend to go on looking for the dawn; more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.

I invite you to join me in taking up this stance. May God help us and bless us.

Amen.