



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

First Sunday of Advent

Readings: [Jeremiah 33.14-16](#), [1 Thessalonians 3.9-13](#), [Luke 21.25-36](#)

1 December 2024

One of delights of travelling to Greece most years, as Sarah and I do, is the taste of fresh figs. A bowl of figs, and Greek yoghurt with a dab of honey, is difficult to beat as you sit on the balcony watching the sunset!

If you want to know the truth about figs and fig trees, then I recommend the 2021 novel - *The Island of Missing Trees* by the Turkish born author Elif Shafak – in which she interweaves human lives and the life of a fig tree growing in a Cyprus taverna. The fig tree watches, listens, waits and patiently observes the human beings who live and interact under its shade, generation after generation and even across continents – I'll leave you to investigate that but I'll let the fig tree speak for *itself*:

Trees might not have eyes, but we have vision. I respond to light, I adore light. I need it not only to process water and carbon dioxide into sugars, grow and germinate, I also need it to feel safe and secure. A plant always bends toward light. Having figured this out about us, humans use the knowledge to trick and manipulate us for their own ends. Flower farmers turn on the lamps in the middle of the night..... With a bit of light you can make us do so much. With a promise of love.... (p.46)

'Look at the fig tree and all the trees,' says Jesus: 'as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near'. In each of the first three Gospels, the fig tree makes an appearance just at this moment when Jesus is talking about the end times and helping his disciples to see the signs of the time. There is turmoil, confusion and distress on the way. Jesus had prepared his disciples for Jesus' death, but now Jesus points them towards the arrival of God's kingdom and the transformation it will bring.

St Luke's account of Jesus' words is darker than in Matthew or Mark: 'people will faint from fear and foreboding' at what is to come. Yet the fig tree, growing and sprouting its leaves in the advancing light of God's summer is to be a sign that the great transformation of a new heaven and a new earth is on its way, in the form of the Son of Man, coming in the clouds.

The symbolism of the fig tree opens up our two other readings. Jeremiah is known for his doom and gloom – not for nothing do we call someone a Jeremiah who is down in the dumps: he's upset with the way the world is going; all that is happening is beyond his control. Jeremiah is finally allowed to speak words of hope. As the armies of Babylon sweep towards Jerusalem, destroying countryside and cities, and dividing the nation, so Jeremiah utters some of the most comforting words in the Old Testament. In the midst of God's judgment, the turmoil of the world, God's promise still stands – that Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety, God's righteousness – his justice – will live amongst his people.

In the letter to the Thessalonian church Paul is demonstrating his anxiety – his proper anxiety - for his converts. How are they doing? And to find the answer Paul sends his colleague Timothy to Thessaloniki to find out. Timothy comes back with good news – the Gospel has taken root, and the local church is thriving. Paul can relax and he prays that they will use their time profitably and that they will be ready for the coming of God. In fact, Paul’s new converts seem to be spending so much time focusing on Jesus’ second coming that he has to write again to encourage them to get on with the ordinary everyday things of life!

In both situations – Jerusalem and Thessaloniki - the light is beginning to shine in the darkness. The fig tree is growing and the people of God are being given the promise of hope for the future.. This is ‘the promise of love’ that comes with the light, to go back to the voice of the fig tree. The growing light of God, the light that will grow in our midst during Advent brings new life. The light of summer is opening up our lives to God. In anticipation we can feel the leaves of our lives beginning to open out with the promise of love blossoming. This is the promise of Advent, the promise of the now, but also the anticipation of the ‘not yet’.

Notice the ask that Jesus makes of his disciples. They are ‘stand up’, to ‘raise their heads’, to greet their redemption in the midst of the darkness and turmoil. God’s coming is to be met, not with a timid waiting that cowers at the challenges, but with a confident boldness. This is the shape of following Jesus the disciples are to adopt after the resurrection: not timidity but boldness; not a passive waiting but a deliberate anticipation of what is to come.

In Advent we are called to be watchful and faithful as we await the coming of Jesus. We can easily mistake this for a way of waiting that is passive, inactive, and therefore ineffective. Something that has been forced upon us like standing in the long queue at the check out or sitting in the traffic jam whiling away the time pointlessly before we reach our destination.

This is not the sort of waiting that God asks of us. Rachel Mann, an Anglican priest, poet and theologian, writer of this year’s Archbishop of York’s Advent study book entitled *Do not Be Afraid*, explores waiting in a world full of fear – the fear of what awaits us on the international stage with political unknowns in USA; or what might transpire in the war in Ukraine and the anticipated escalation of military engagement; or, after the debates of last week, we might add our concern about how the next stages of the public debate about Assisted Dying are going to unfold, now parliament has voted, in principle and in support.

This is the living in fear, the sort of anxiety, that Jesus explores with his disciples, the things that we have no control over, the anxiety about which can impact deeply and negatively upon our wellbeing and outlook.

Rachel Mann reflects on what a reasonable, Christ-centred response to anxieties about the world in 2025 and beyond might look like, and she writes:

I think one answer lies in daring to embrace the gift of waiting. That might sound counter-intuitive. ‘Waiting’ can sound passive and lacking in urgency. I want to suggest that waiting done well brings a rich and holy response to the anxieties of modern living both small and great, local and global. More than that, that waiting can bring that unexpected gift: joy’.ⁱ

The sort of waiting that Rachel Mann is trying to put her finger upon is the waiting that comes out of struggle for a better world. She says: ‘struggling for justice, mercy and love is a way to be moved by hope: more than that, that in fighting unfair situations with hope, we can find the where-withal to wait’. Waiting in the reality of God who lived, and is now risen, has the last word over anxiety. And this is the ‘joy of waiting in a time of fear’. It’s the sort of waiting that God invites us into on this Advent Sunday.

This is the active waiting of Jeremiah in breaking through to a new message of security and safety for Jerusalem. This is the active waiting of St Paul as he struggles to bring his new converts to a mature faith in following the one who is yet to come. It’s the sort of waiting that Jesus invites his disciples to adopt as they are to respond to their fears by ‘standing up’ and ‘raising their heads’.

Advent Sunday is a vital moment as the Christian year turns full circle. As we focus on the God who comes so we focus on the key message we are given to proclaim. Two words: God comes.

In our creeds we proclaim our belief in the God ‘who comes to judge the living and the dead’. At the core of our faith God comes to us as the one who holds ‘the promise of love’ and with that God holds us accountable for the gifts we have been given - the whole of humanity, for our individual lives, and for how the world is as a result of the decisions we take.

This is the hard bit of Advent. There will be affirmation but there will be things that we fall short of. It’s a side of Advent we must attend to if we are to be true to the scriptures we read Sunday by Sunday. But we do so with the fig tree in mind. Out of the troubles of this unsatisfactory world there is a gathering and growing light that represents the summer coming to us out of the future. It’s that powerful, unclouded light coming towards us that dispels the darkness of our anxiety that prevents us from flourishing and stops our leaves growing. I believe that the proactive, ‘holy waiting’ that Jesus advocates to his disciples and which we find in the struggle for fairness in our world – this is where we are to be focused this Advent.

‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees. As soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer’ – the summer of God’s kingdom – ‘is already near’. Amen.

The Very Revd Dr Peter Robinson, Dean of Derby