

# A time to look forward

A sermon preached by the Very Rev Jim Mein at St Margaret's and Holy Trinity  
on Advent Sunday, 29 November 2015

The readings were Jeremiah 33:14–16; 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13 and Luke 21:25–36

Advent Sunday has come round again – another year gone, another year starting – enough to make anyone feel tired! No wonder there is a lot of drinking on December 31st!

Well let me start by saying I think one of the bedrocks of my faith these days is that we are **not** on an eternal circular treadmill, each year with its superficial differences but fundamentally a repetition of all the years that have gone before and all that will follow after.

On the contrary, God's creation, and the lives of each one of us, is a continuing process, a gradual unfolding. This is what our readings this morning suggest – though their time frame is rather different to ours:

Jeremiah promising that the days are surely coming – for justice and righteousness in the land.

Paul begging the Thessalonians to increase and abound in love in order to be ready for the coming of Jesus.

And Luke writing of the signs of the times which are the predictions of the coming of the new age.

As I say, their time scale was vastly different to ours. Paul and Luke appear to have believed that the end of the present age would come in their lifetime. It would take longer than I have, and someone brighter, to explain how their understanding of history, both the past and the future, was different to ours, but different it certainly was.

The beginning of a new year invites us to meditate on the past and the future – I'd like to try that, not in detail but broad brush. Life has always been precarious. From the first emergence of humanity our species experienced the threats of cold,

heat and starvation, of wild animals and neighbouring tribes, of sickness and the forces, or 'acts of God', which were beyond their control and which they could not understand. The dangers were all too clear. Life was hard, dangerous and short.

We might seem different. The central heating takes care of winter, the supermarkets are full whatever the weather, wild animals are safely locked up in zoos, wars are generally far away, the health service, for all we complain, is expected to cure our ills, and the forces people used to fear we now see as superstition. Today we are comfortable; life is under control.

Well, of course that is not true. Events in Paris, the news from Syria and a multitude of other countries, remind us of danger and chaos. I'm certainly pleased I live today rather than in any past age, but fundamentally the precarious nature of life has not changed. Indeed in some respects we may face even more challenges than our ancestors. Comparisons are impossible and irrelevant; but our rapid use of the earth's resources, global warming and floods, pressure on water supplies, continuing population growth, terrorist threats, new diseases for which we have no antibiotics, dementia – the list is long – and we are told the general stress levels in western nations are high: it has always been so.

It was so in Biblical times. As we look back through history there has always been the need to hope for a better future. I think it is part of our basic DNA – we hope; we believe the future can be better. This hope is one of the basic thrusts of religion. But I sometimes wonder if we are in danger of losing it in our modern world. There is a deep cynicism about politics, about our

ability to plan, organise, our corporate future. I sense a retreat on many fronts to a concern for ourselves, for our particular family or group or nation – or indeed our particular bit of the universal Church. The vision of a united, caring, inter-dependent world seems to be less bright than it was in biblical times or in the post-war Britain many of us grew up in.

But as I say, today we start a new Church year; in a month it will be a new secular year. It is a time to look forward with real hope that God's kingdom can draw closer. Of course I'm not expecting Jesus to float down from the skies to establish his kingdom as people thought possible 2,000 years ago. Nor am I expecting some marvellous political leader to emerge and establish a just and peaceful land in 2016 with well-funded health care and houses and jobs for everyone.

But I do have hope: partly because, in spite of all the many problems, I do believe we have made progress over the past centuries. Even in my lifetime better race relations: not only the end of apartheid, but in America and here more contacts between peoples of different colour. And great strides in the place of women in society, even in the Church. And an end to criminalising gay people. In Paul's great trilogy – Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free – it may be the slave or free, in the sense of the rich who have power and the poor who feel helpless, which needs most attention in our present world. And we must certainly add a greater integration of humanity and nature, a care for our environment – the march yesterday in Edinburgh was a real sign of this growing concern. There is obviously a long way to go on many fronts, but signs, green shoots, are there if we look for them.

But it is not really the successes (limited but real) of the past that feed my hope. Rather it is the belief that our Christian faith calls us to look forward rather than back. Perhaps that needs a little justification – so often the Church looks back. It's easy to see how we can slip into this. The ancient myth of the Garden of Eden could make us think our aim is to return there – though the myth itself denies this with the angel with a flaming sword barring the gate, and it was our acquiring the knowledge of good and evil that really created our humanity. We know there was no garden and that death and decay have always been part of the earth's way of life.

Or, more tempting, we might look back to Jesus and to the Bible – pretending that all truth was set out there. All the answers are available, if only we could shout more loudly to our present world. The Church has often tried to do this, but then continually had to adjust and catch up. I think moral progress has very often been led by Christian individuals and groups inspired by their faith, but they generally had to work against the dead weight of the institutional Church.

Jesus looked forward: he built on the past and then went beyond it. He expected the disciples to continue growing – to move out from Judaism to the whole world. He recognised that there were truths the people of his generation could not take on board – but the Spirit, he said, would lead us.

The kingdom of God lies in the future – it is in the process of being created. We are not called to fear the modern world but to sanctify it – to see God's will within it and help all humanity continue the journey. Our faith is not an escape from the complexities of life, but rather it should give us the strength to face life.

We don't know what the future holds for our world, particularly in the short term, but God's future depends, in a quite terrifying way, at least partly, on how we women and men commit ourselves to that future, trusting the Spirit, searching for the positive possibilities, being willing to risk. We have to engage with the great themes which we traditionally remember from the archetypal stories of the Bible on these four Sundays of Advent – the Patriarchs, courage moving into the unknown; the Prophets, passion for justice; John the Baptist, calling the people to repentance, believing a new beginning is possible; and Mary, who welcomed God into her life.

The dawn of a new year is not an invitation to repeat the past. Neither our Church nor our world can remain repeating year after year, like a mouse turning their wheel in their cage. A rut, dug deep, becomes a grave. A new year calls us to renew our search for life in all its future fullness. We are not created in the image of the amoeba from which we evolved, but in the image of God to whom we journey. The God who is always ahead of us, calling us into a new year, new hope, new life. God bless you on the journey.