

Advent and Lockdown

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, Year C, 5 December 2021
St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Malachi 3: 1-4; Song of Zechariah; Philippians 1: 1-11; Luke 3: 1-6

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Everybody's plainly had enough of lockdowns, and everywhere people are asking when things will be back to how they were, back to *normal*. As if that's the only appropriate outcome, as if COVID and its lockdowns have nothing to teach us, as if they're not harbingers of something important, that we have to take note of, as if there's no opportunity in all this upheaval. Clearly the protesters against masks, vaccines and lockdowns don't like what all this tells us. They don't like the reminder that they're members of the herd, equally susceptible to this disease alongside all those other people they think they're better than. They don't like to hear that they're responsible for others, that their own right to choose isn't absolute, and in particular they don't like to be told that we have to live differently.

The French intellectual Bruno Latour has a new book out called *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis*, in which he discerns a lesson and an opportunity for our species in COVID and in the lockdowns. He says that this disruption, this forced restraint, this unaccustomed mutuality, this new respect for the uncontrollable forces of nature, is all salutary, if we're to become a species able to live with climate change, and to make the sacrifices that it will take to limit how bad things get. COVID and the lockdowns are a taste of what's coming, an opportunity to embrace a new normal, because in truth we can't go back. We can't go back to individualism, neo-liberalism, populism, tribalism, and everything else that takes our eyes off what has to be the main game if our species is going to hand on a habitable earth.

For Bruno Latour, contrary to so many populist politicians and their anxious followers, lockdowns are a messenger, helping us get used to a future that will not be comfortable, where we have to become what he calls terrestrials, learning to think differently about our lives, our communities, our responsibilities, about how we relate to the earth and its resources. Who knows what new pandemics, what hordes of climate refugees, what agricultural and economic collapses are coming our way that we'll have to face patiently and in a grown-up way if we're to get through, without populists capitalizing on our anxieties and a large number of people stubbornly pulling in a different direction?

No wonder there are so many protests about COVID restrictions, and so much resistance. Because, deep down, people sense that we're being given an uncomfortable message, one which blocks any path back to the old normal.

Friends, the prophet Malachi gives us a similar reminder this morning. God is fulfilling old promises but in new ways, which is good news about a new future but bad news if all we're committed to is the old normal. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, catches the joy of this in our canticle this morning. It's not all bad news. Paul in our Philippians passage this morning

rejoices that Christians are abandoning the old normal and coming to embrace the new future that God gives them in Jesus Christ, learning to live accordingly, to live differently. And so, Paul too is joyful. Luke in our Gospel puts this message on a public stage, spelling it out in terms of politics and history.

See how Luke starts with a list of who's who in the political zoo, from the Emperor to the Governor to the client King to the local official—it's the whole cast list from *Game of Thrones*. Yet Luke puts this whole nexus of power and entrenched-if-uneasy normalcy on notice, because God's word comes to their world at a tangent, out in the wilderness.

Then there's that lovely passage that Luke quotes from the Servant Song in Isaiah Chapter 40, so beautifully set by Handel in *Messiah*, with every mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight, and the rough places plain—with the community made ready to embrace the new thing promised by John the Baptizer, in his challenging call to repent.

You might read this simply as imagery of preparation for Jesus' arrival—tidy the place up and lay out the red carpet. But René Girard reads this vision of Isaiah differently. The highs and lows, the rough places, the crooked ways, are all symbolic of a certain type of world, run by the *Game of Thrones* cast who begin our Gospel today: a world of violent conflict, losing and winning, of deception and avoidance, of high drama and sullen defeat. That's the world we're being invited to leave behind, and once we stop thinking in those terms, we'll be able to see God clearly, we'll be able to know what's sacred and holy and worthwhile and what needs to be let go of. In other words, the message of Advent is that there's no way back to humanity's old normal. And if we were able to resist the call of God to a new human future in Jesus Christ without too terrible consequences for the last two thousand years, we're not going to be able to get away with it even for another hundred years. Because our chickens are coming home to roost.

Friends, the Eucharist we celebrate invites us to see ourselves and our world and our God differently, to experience an intimacy with Jesus and a solidarity with God's people, and to go from being a Church of comfortable habit to a Church of vocational seriousness. And it's all gift, none of it's a curse. It's humans who'll make the curse, if we keep up the protests and the tomfoolery and the smug entitlement, and if we refuse the opportunity that COVID mandates and restrictions have given us to take stock. As Christians, we should be the first on board with all this, because we have Advent in our DNA, and because God calls the Church to take a lead in welcoming the new normal.

The Lord be with you ...