

Third Sunday of Advent - 2017

Today the Rose candle of joy is lit. Its light shines out in the midst of the other four more sombre, violet ones; a metaphor perhaps for this day.

When I listen to music by Ralph Vaughan Williams I become strangely romantic. I have these visions, memories even, of a rural idyll, of the English countryside, the distant church bells calling folk to worship, of verdant pastures, haystacks, the call of the cuckoo. Why is it that I think like this? I have no real memory of this, I have never lived in the English countryside, until recently I thought that milk came from cartons! I've had the same feeling at choir practise recently we have been singing Australian Carols they speak of the outback, blooming wattles, fern gullies, the call of the Boobook. It's the same sort of romantic vision, it is lovely and it is why music and art are so important because they do help us escape the mundane and humdrum. But this joy is not complete reality, it is light shining in darkness, it is the light that the Baptist testified to.

'Et in arcadia ego', is the title of Book One of the novel *Brideshead Revisited*, 'I was in Arcadia.' Charles the narrator writes of a cloudless day in June when the ditches were creamy with meadowsweet and the air heavy with the scents of summer. Arcadia was a real region in ancient Greece: isolated, surrounded by mountains, sparsely populated by shepherds; romanticized as a kind of terrestrial paradise, a place of unspoiled nature whose inhabitants still lived in blissful harmony.

Charles however was writing of his idyllic memories in the context of WWII he was now an army officer at war. There is a famous painting depicting shepherds in an idyllic setting, but they have gathered around a tomb, with the phrase 'Et in Arcadia Ego' inscribed on it. This Latin phrase also translates 'Even in Arcadia I exist', the inscription refers to the contents of the tomb: death. These shepherds are discovering their own mortality... reality. Where's all this going you might well ask? Surely Christmas is around the corner! Haven't we just lit the pink candle? Can't we just sing some carols!! Patience my friends...we will this evening!!

The Old Testament reading this morning from Isaiah addresses a time after the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon. You can imagine that they were returning full of hope and expectancy, wanting to restore the old ways. The prophet however addresses a community struggling to rebuild the ancient city and restore it to its former glory. There is persecution and internal division but the prophet promises: to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn. These are the words that Jesus used at the beginning of his public ministry in Luke's gospel, but they are given a new potency on his lips, they are given a new context on his lips, it is the potency and context of the cross. It is not a romantic vision of the old ways, it is something new.

The issues besetting the Holy Land today are incredibly complex, they are not new. The Israeli prime minister speaking this week with the French president said: Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, just as Paris is the capital of France. If only it really were as simple as that. In old maps Jerusalem is shown as the centre of the world; in some translations of Psalm 48 we read: Mount Zion City of God, true pole of the earth. It is so much more than the capital city of a state. Whilst I have sympathy for the people Israel there is almost a romantic notion of a glorious past which is driving their hopes and dreams, it is not reality.

In one of the verses of a carol that we will sing tonight there is a hint of this reality. It's an Australian carol called 'The day that Christ was born on.' It speaks of all those things you would expect outback stations, magpies, sheep etc. But one verse contains these words: When the ranges turn to flame and the winds like trumpets blow, you can say and I can say seven times and seven, here at last is Christmas Day, the day Christ came from heaven. There is something apocalyptic about this verse, wind, flame and the blast of the trumpet! Not the Christmas we might expect, this is the Advent of God at the end of time. We are tempted to be romantic about this coming season but this verse warns us to beware of this romanticism. Jesus tells us in Luke 'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were kindled already.' The Advent of God is the coming of the Spirit, and we know that fire in the bush is both destructive *and* life giving....reality. And notice too the hint of hope: *you can say and I can say seven times and seven*. The year of the Lord's favour was the seventh year. The sabbatical or seventh year when slaves were freed and debts cancelled and every seventh sabbatical was special again land holdings redistributed to their original owners. Hope in the midst of struggle...reality!

This evening we will begin a season of celebration. Tonight's nine lessons and carols is among the most magical evenings. But let us not get too romantic about it all. As we sing of the rural scene of the shepherds on the hillside, let us be mindful of reality...of the tomb, Christmas marks the beginning of the end, the cross looms large even now. Celebrate we must, and should, but we do so mindful of the dispossessed and of the many and varied issues that beset our world. We might be tempted either to despair or romantic unreality, neither is appropriate. We must hold fast to the promises that are ours and the hope which is the mark of the season so beautifully spoken by the prophet and then again by Jesus.

It is a hope that will be elusive. It is a hope that we might be tempted to find by looking to some better time and place in the past; some place we remember perhaps albeit vaguely. But our hope and joy does not lie there, our hope and joy lies in the future. So whilst tonight and in the coming days we think of those wondrous events of the past let us not get too misty eyed, we look to the future, but the future is not what it was! Jesus it seems was standing in the group that John the Baptist was talking to and they did not know him. His spirit is in the midst of everything, and it is in him crucified and risen that our future lies, if we can but recognise him and fix our eyes on him. Amen.