

The first Sunday of Advent 2021

O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!

So begins the poem by Francis Thompson *The Kingdom of God* subtitled 'In no strange Land.'

I wonder perhaps if like me you have a sense of being in a strange land. Division over issues such as climate change and the Pandemic, to name but two, are creating a sense of alienation for many and I find myself longing for an alternative. Advent calls us to a place in which we look back to the events of the incarnation and to future events, the consummation of time and of all things. Classic Christian spirituality requires of us to live between times, to hold things in balance. Advent requires of us intelligent waiting, patience; Advent reminds us of the passing of time and the need to maintain a sense of perspective. We can all too easily be consumed by these 'big picture' issues and miss opportunities, we can all too easily forget that generations before us have also despaired at times, we can all too easily lose that vision of the kingdom that Thompson speaks of.

Let's for a moment enter into the thought world of St Luke. He is a well-educated story teller of note; in a few words he can fire our imaginations and evoke a whole new world. He is a Greek speaker probably living in a Roman town in modern day Turkey around AD69. He is hearing news of the fierce war in Judea. The Romans have besieged Jerusalem and are close to taking the city. There is civil disobedience, the everyday life of the city has ceased, many are hungry, the economy has collapsed, parts of the city are close to ruin. Rumours abound that the political life of the empire is unstable, Nero has died at own hands and Galba the new emperor is reported to have been killed, a civil war is looming as 'would be' emperors vie for supremacy. All those fixed points of ordinary day to day life are suddenly in question.

Twenty years pass and Luke and his fellow Christians gathering together in small house churches reflect on what occurred. Jerusalem is still in ruins, the Temple at its heart destroyed. There is a new emperor, Domitian, and stories abound of persecution. But life has continued, family, new life, hospitality, politics, healing and illness and death. Luke begins to collect stories that folk have brought on pieces of parchment, he listens to the oral tradition of the older members of the community, he looks around him at his community and he decides to write an orderly account.

Welcome to Advent in the year of Luke. Luke is committed to helping us see a particular vision of God and God's kingdom so that we might be prepared and better equipped to identify the God who has come among us, who is with us now, and whom we wait for still. This is what our patient, intelligent, balanced waiting is all about. It is a matter of looking for signs, this is why Jesus tells the parable of the Fig Tree and all the trees; this is the key to understanding our readings. We are not waiting for something to happen, but we are waiting for the wisdom

to see the signs of what is already happening, in plain sight, just like the budding of the trees. Thompson writes:

Does the fish soar to find the ocean,
The eagle plunge to find the air-
That we ask of the stars in motion
If they have rumour of thee there?

Luke speaks to us profoundly of God appearing to us in the everyday events of life, events that we might consider so mundane as not to be worthy of our attention. As the world around him seems to be in chaos he writes of a pregnant teenager, he writes of an elderly couple without family wondering about the meaning of their lives; the man who gets mugged and left for dead; he writes about family disputes over inheritance and the young man who leaves the family becomes homeless. He is concerned about the victims of accidents and state sponsored terror; he writes of the God in Christ who is concerned with corrupt business practises, tax officials and the way they deal with their money and the wide gap, the chasm, between the poor and the rich; he writes about the role of women, the bereaved and those condemned to die, the robber crucified with Jesus in Luke's account is reminded of the presence of the kingdom in the present...today. Of all the evangelists only Luke has Jesus say *'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; you can't say: "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.'* Indeed, the kingdom is so close we barely recognise it. This is the Lucan God we will be travelling with during this year, and if we listen and wait patiently and carefully we will recognise this God in our day to day lives.

Not where the wheeling systems darken,
And our benumbed conceiving soars!-
The drift of pinions, would we hearken,
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.

The angels keep their ancient places;-
Turn but a stone, and start a wing!
'Tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces,
That miss the many-splendoured thing.

We are naturally concerned about the ongoing pandemic, and we should, it is something that has ramifications for us all; just as we are concerned about the environment and the damage that is being done to our planet. But Luke doesn't separate the macro and the micro, they are one. Whilst we might faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world; let us not fail to see the kingdom quietly imposing on our lives in many, many ways, and its call on us; we can all find ways in which Luke's gospel speaks into the circumstances of our lives.

Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,
Cry,- clinging Heaven by the hems;
And lo, Christ walking on the water
Not of Gennesareth, but Thames!

Amen.