

The promise of God's love

A sermon preached by Revd William Whyte for the 2nd Sunday before Advent, 15 November 2020

Amidst all the uncertainties in the world – amidst the doubts about the pandemic, the fears about the lockdown, the hopes about the potential for a vaccine – amidst all that flux, it's rather reassuring to be thrown back into the familiar gloom of Advent. It's an almost comforting fact that the closer Christmas gets, the more violent, threatening, and frightening the readings become – and here, in the second Sunday before Advent, we have a glimpse of the apocalypse to come.

Our first reading promises “a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry”. Our second predicts the “sudden destruction”.

Yet it is our Gospel that seems to me the most disturbing. The first two readings prophesy something awful. But the gloom and doom, the pain and the destruction are for those who ignore God's message. The day of wrath in our Old Testament lesson is for the wicked. The destruction in the letter to the Thessalonians is for the complacent and self-satisfied. However awful this seems, there is at least a certain logic to it all. In our Gospel, by contrast, the bad guy gets to be the hero, the good guys do well by doing bad things, and the victim is not a sinner, not self-satisfied, but simply scared.

The story goes like this: a man goes away, leaving his slaves some money. One gets five talents, trades – more likely loans his money at a high interest rate, which is a sin – and makes a profit. Another gets two talents and – in an equally shady way – makes a profit too. The last slave is given only one. Terrified of his master's wrath, for he believes him to be an avaricious, grasping, greedy, and violent man, he hides it and returns it to him. Far from being pleased at this evidence of probity and perhaps even piety, the master is furious, revealing, it seems, just what a nasty man he is. “You wicked and lazy slave!” he exclaims. “You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest.” He punishes the poor slave – casting him into darkness, where there will (in true Advent spirit), “be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

It is, in all sorts of ways, a really horrible story. But it's one we should take seriously – precisely because it's so obviously disconcerting. It's a good rule of Biblical study that the more difficult Jesus' teachings seem, the more likely they are to be authentic. They are disturbing, they don't quite fit; but the authors of the Gospels just had to include them because they were what Jesus actually said.

So we can't just ignore this. We can't pretend this isn't here. This is a story that Jesus told – almost certainly in these words – and it's a story that's meant to tell us something. The question, is, what? Or, more particularly, why might Jesus want us to sympathise with the master and not with his terrified slave? How is this image – this picture of apparent tyranny, this bullying of a frightened man – anything like the Kingdom of God?

Let's look at the details again. The master is pleased with the two slaves who have taken what they were given and boldly – even recklessly, against the rules – have made something more. He is angry with the man who simply kept what he had, returning it untouched. The slave explains: “I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid”. It is this that infuriates his master. “You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter”. The master, in other words, rejects this imputation. It is the slave who has imagined a wicked master – who has conjured up this ogre. It is his own fear; his terror at an imagined monster, that has frozen him, preventing him from doing good.

The point is this: that the master is not a bad man. Rather, his slave imagines that he is – and this fear stands in his way of understanding either the master or his own duty. Instead of taking what he has and making more, instead risking something, he hides what he is given and offers it back to master in fear and in trembling.

And a lot of Christians are like that. They – we – imagine a God who is angry and capricious: a God who needs to be appeased; a God who punishes; a God to be afraid of. And some Christians use that image of God to persecute others. Some Christians use that image of God to persecute themselves. Many of us, I suspect, probably do think of God as a terrible judge, a frightening father, a demanding and disapproving master. Either way, this human, all-too human, image has a distorting effect. It prevents us from seeing the real God – the God of love. It prevents us from truly seeing ourselves – from understanding that we are not the frightened, failing, frustrating creatures of our own imagining, but rather that we are the children of God, loved beyond all measure by a God who made us in love and for love and through love.

Above all, seeing God in the way that the slave saw the master freezes us: preventing us from doing what we ought. Instead of celebrating, we mourn. Instead broadcasting the good news, we keep it to ourselves. Instead of counting our blessings and then sharing them with others: we worry and agonize. We create the outer darkness for ourselves.

That is the message of our Gospel, and of other readings, and of Advent itself. Instead of focusing on our failings, instead of fearing what is to be, instead of conjuring up a God of fear and fury: we should focus on the promise of God's love – and its embodiment, its proof, in Jesus Christ.

AMEN.