

God is near

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

In the last few weeks I've had the privilege of visiting the Royal Blind School in Canaan Lane on a number of occasions. The involvement of the school in our recent Remembrance weekend with their wonderful tactile art work, and in particular the beautiful reflections and poems produced not only in print but also in braille were one of the highlights of that weekend for me. It was fascinating watching sighted people, young and old alike, running their fingers over the braille, making a connection in a way with the world of visual impairment that they had probably never made before. It was also deeply moving to see young people who are not only blind, but living with other complex health issue and unable to communicate verbally finding means to communicate through touch. I will never forget the young person who, unable to see or hear or speak, reached out to touch my chest as I spoke to him so that he could feel the vibration of my voice. Not able to understand what I was saying, but able to know that someone was near.

Touch is an important, though some times complex, part of human living. Babies deprived of skin-to-skin contact with their mothers and fathers suffer a sense of isolation, and that important bonding just after the birth has taken place, and in the weeks afterwards, can be more difficult. Babies are not always calm and placid, but on many occasions, it is that physical sense of connection, associated with touch, sound, smell, that for parent and child can provide a strong sense of comfort, care and well-being. I don't know that we ever lose that need.

At the other end of the age-range, in nursing homes and care facilities, when some older people are lost in the labyrinth of dementia, it is the sound of a loved one's voice, even if the face is not always recognised, and the touch of a hand that can give a reassurance that cannot be explained, but can be felt.

In a lot of what the Church aims to do, through the Baby and Toddler Group, the Monday Circle, the Wednesday Coffee morning and the coffee after Sunday worship; through the Wednesday Men's Club and the Church visitors; through our connection with charities like the Edinburgh

Clothing Store and the Christmas Clothing drive; through the delivery of Christmas cards to the parish; through the music in worship, and the Blue Christmas service; and through many, many other things we offer, what we are offering is different kinds of 'touching places'. Places where people who are apart can be brought together. Places where people who are isolated can be welcomed. Places where people who are excluded can be included.

The First Sunday of Advent might seem an odd time to read Luke's Gospel account of Jesus being more than a little apocalyptic about the coming of the Kingdom of God. Signs in the heavens, distress in the nations, roaring of the sea and waves, fainting, fear and foreboding. It reads like a Biblical Brexit and should possibly be read in the voice of Private Fraser from *Dad's Army*. "We're all doomed!" Here is no sweet baby Jesus enticing us into the nativity scene, which so many people expect from Advent and who often say why can't the Church get on with Christmas already?

It's a bit like the desire to have Easter without Holy Week and Good Friday.

Jesus, and the season of Advent, demands a very different kind of preparation. Vincent van Gogh captures the mood of this Advent reading in one of his most famous paintings, *The Starry Night*. In bold colours van Gogh, the son of a Dutch pastor and for a time an evangelist to the poor himself, paints an apocalyptic sky, like the one described by Jesus. There are swirling clouds in bold yellows and white on deep, dark blue and black. There is a bold and bright yellow moon and very bright stars. In the background is a small town, with a Church steeple, and in the foreground a foreboding, flame-like figure connecting earth and sky. Is it an image that is meant to frighten and daunt? Or is it an image that offers us a startling glimpse of the nearness of God. For me it is the latter. God's presence, God's nearness, makes me nervous, but it comforts me too. It makes me nervous because it shows up the faults and failings and inadequacies of my life; but it also reminds me that however broken I might sometimes be, God is near. It reminds me of the need to stay awake, and to be surprised but reassured of the many ways in which God is close, so very close, to the world. God is near.

That is the point of Advent. To wake us up to the coming closeness of God. That is the point of the incarnation, and the promise of Christmas, to remind us of the nearness of God.

God is near, in the challenges of family life and the pressures of work. God is near, when family and friends seem far away. God is near, when ill health or medical procedures make us feel further and further from normal living. God is near when bereavement surrounds us in gloom for short or long periods. God is near when politics drives us up the wall and back down again when nobody seems to be listening. God is near when racism rears its ugly head and we wonder about what people feel motivated by when they are stupidly unwelcoming to refugee Syrian school children. God is near when the Church and its maintenance feels more of a burden than a pleasure. God is near when you're not sure whether you're going to be able to go on because you are so tired, or so frightened, or so lonely, or so angry, or so isolated.

To some people that might not seem much. But if you have even a tiny shred of faith, it is **so** much. Like the touch of a parent on a child; like the touch of a loved one on a person disappearing in dementia; like the touch of a teacher on a blind child's hand, it is the reassurance that we live in a world that must be build on nearness, and not distance. Togetherness not isolation.

I spent a lot of time in recent months talking about the need for building longer tables and not higher walls, and about the need to build bridges. I believe fundamentally that Christians are people who ought to be in as many ways as are sustainable, be the people who bring people together. We might not be able to fix everything but at least we can stand and sit together, shoulder to shoulder, in community and in solidarity.

At the Advent Study group last Wednesday we thought about what kind of community we wanted to live in. One that valued old and young; one that recognised that we no longer lived in the 1950s; one that appreciated how tired people in their working years are and the longer hours many seem to be working these days; one that had a concern for people who had never been 'joiners' of organisations or groups or church in their active years, and suddenly found themselves cast adrift when work finished; one that wasn't prejudiced towards people of

different backgrounds; one that valued the benefit of bringing people together for one-off events, when longer term commitments no longer fitted the way people lived. But it was clear, community was valued, and the Church is one of the richest providers of community experience, and continues to be the most prolific provider of volunteers in every walk of life. Even in these difficult days, there remain signs of hope.

Which takes me back to Luke's Gospel. "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees", says Jesus. "As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that summer is already near."

Just as buds on trees and shoots from the earth in these days of winter offers hope, so God's word in Jesus promises us new life. God is near.

Just as a little piece of bread and a sip of wine from the Communion table today speaks of a Last Supper, so God's word in Jesus promises us blessing and community at this Communion time. God is near.

"Look up and raise your heads", says Jesus. "Your redemption is near." Real hope; real healing; real action; real answers. Today, right now. God is near. Believe it! Live it!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen