

201129 Reflection

A few years ago, when there was a consciousness of an increasing threat of terrorism, there was a slogan that I think came from John Howard, 'Be alert, but not alarmed.' Do you remember that? Today's gospel reading is also telling us the importance of vigilance. Keep awake! Be aware! Stay alert! It's repeated a few times, just to make sure you get the message.

So Jesus tells us to stay alert. But what are we to be alert about? What are we to keep a look out for? Not signs of terrorism activity, not strangers acting suspiciously, not bags left unattended at the airport. No, we are to keep alert to the signs of God's coming. The Advent of God. Watch out for the signs that show that God is near, very near. Indeed, he is at the very gates. And we must stay alert to be ready to welcome him when he comes. Otherwise, we might miss him altogether!

So the question for us particularly in this Advent season, when we are supposed to be preparing for God's coming is: *Are you awake?* Are you looking for the signs of God's imminent approach? Will you be ready for him when he comes or will he find you asleep? Are you actively looking for God's coming?

The first candle of Advent is the candle of hope. Let me ask you: today, this Advent, what do you hope for?

2020 has been said to be a horror year for Australia. The beginning of this year saw disastrous bushfires, the likes of which we have never seen. The word 'unprecedented' was heard time and again over the news as millions of hectares burnt, communities were devastated, and an estimated 3 billion native animals were killed or displaced. The smoke from the fires was so bad that the skies in New Zealand turned orange and their emergency services received hundreds of calls from the public asking what was going on. Maybe they thought it was the end of the world?

And then came the coronavirus and the lockdowns and border closures. When we look at what is happening in the rest of the world, we can say that Australia has got off pretty lightly. Our deaths number in the hundreds, whereas in the rest of the world, 1.4 million people have died, with little sign of numbers abating.

And while Australia has managed to keep the case numbers down, the lockdowns have had a terrible impact on the economy, with hundreds of

thousands losing their jobs and companies going to the wall. Again, we heard the word 'unprecedented' repeatedly used. And the same economic downturn is also taking place around the world. Here in Australia it has been bad enough, but I don't think we can even imagine what it has been like in the poorest countries of the world.

And just because we have had to contend with a pandemic it doesn't mean that all the usual disasters that plague the world have been suspended. No, this year has seen its share of earthquakes, typhoons, droughts and flood. Wars have continued and new conflicts have broken out. Refugee camps are still overflowing. Global warming continues to escalate.

Yes, it has been a horror year, for us and for the world. After such a year, what can we hope for? What do you hope for for the world? In our Old Testament reading, the prophet Isaiah says to God, 'Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!' It seems to Isaiah that God has forsaken his people and turned his face away. After a year like we have experienced, maybe we also feel the same, that God appears to have turned away. And we hope for, we long for, we yearn for God to come and set this broken world to rights.

(pause) Apart from our hopes for the world, what do we hope for in our personal lives? That can vary from person to person. Christmas is not necessarily a happy time for everyone. Some of us have memories of happy Christmases in our young day, of big family gatherings, of celebrations, presents and fun. But as we grow older, things may no longer be so simple.

A friend of mine simply dreads Christmas, because this is the one time in the year when she is obliged to get together with her family. Now several members of her family and the in-laws don't get along, they really rub each other up the wrong way. So when they get together, it can be very tense and unpleasant. The family can avoid each other the rest of the year, but at Christmas time, everyone is expected to gather at Nana's and Pop's for the big Christmas lunch. And my friend knows, she just knows that after a little too much to drink, someone is going to make a rude remark, and someone else is going to take offence, and there is bound to be some bust-up or other. One year, a couple of the men nearly came to blows over the right way to carve the turkey. My friend's hope is quite simple: that she could just have one Christmas when the family are nice to each other, but she doubts that things will change.

This week, I visited a gentleman in hospital. He has a bad heart and after his last appointment with his cardiac specialist, he asked if he should make the next appointment. His specialist said: 'Oh, I wouldn't bother.' It was as much to say, 'You won't make it to another appointment.' When I visited this gentleman in hospital, he had a lovely bunch of flowers at his bedside. I asked him who they were from and he said his daughter had brought them. I was aware that this gentleman also had 2 sons that he didn't get along with, so I gently asked if his sons also knew he was in hospital. He was quiet for a while. Then he said that they had refused to come to see him. If this man makes it to Christmas, it will be his last one.

Sometimes, it is hard to keep hopeful, isn't it? Especially if the things that you hope for, like an end to the pandemic, or turning back climate change or even simple personal things, like family peace and harmony seem so unlikely, so improbable, so impossible even. Given the state of the world, how do we keep hopeful?

But just when we might be tempted to sink into despair, just when things seem to be at their worst, that's when we need to be trying our hardest to look for signs of hope. Christmas in the Northern hemisphere falls on the darkest day of the year. Because it is when things are at their darkest that we most need to look for the light. It is when God seems to be absent that we most need to be actively seeking him. Keep alert! Stay awake! Watch for the *signs* that show that God is drawing near.

What signs, you might ask. Where do you look for signs of hope? These signs may not be so apparent. If we don't pay attention, if we are not alert, we might miss these signs. The darkness may be so overwhelming that we miss the glimmers of light.

Let me give you an example. A couple of weeks ago on ABC Radio National, a retired couple was interviewed. They are called Julie and Jeff Wicks, from Queensland. They have set up a charitable foundation to fight climate change. The Wicks worked out how much money they needed to retire on and they put the rest of their money into the Foundation, about 10 times the amount they kept for themselves. And not only that, they are intending for the Foundation to spend all the money in the next 10 years. Most philanthropists, when they set up a foundation usually stipulate that the principle sum is invested and the interest is given out as grants. But the Wicks feel that climate change is so urgent that they want to throw all their money at it in the immediate future. The Foundation is designed to run out of money in 10 years.

What a bold and imaginative idea. And generous. People like the Wicks give me hope for Australia and for the planet.

Have you been following the news from America? The elections, Black Lives Matter, the riots, the bungling of the coronavirus response? I think many of us would say that country is in a shambles. And we would be saying thank God we don't live there. Doesn't that country seem to be full of crazy people? And yet during Australia's bushfire crisis, those crazy people donated more than \$50 million to the NSW Rural Fire Service. For me, that's a sign of hope. From an unexpected place.

And in my daily life, if I pay attention, if I am alert, I see so many more signs of hope. I see so many acts of kindness, of generosity, of self-sacrifice, from ordinary people, people like you and me. Too many to mention.

Finally, as the people of God, not only are we to be alert for the signs of hope, we ourselves are called to *be* signs of hope. For we are the body of Christ carrying out his mission in the world today. It is our privilege and our joy to demonstrate the love of God for the world and so bring hope to the world. And here at SIUC, we do this.

It might be by cooking and serving meals to the homeless. It might be by supporting a child through World Vision. It might be by taking a meal around to a neighbour who is unwell. It might be by volunteering at a working bee. It might be by giving to the Christmas Bowl. All those things I know you quietly do, and in so doing bring hope.

So I have hope. I choose to trust that, however improbable, things *can* change for the better, that after the darkness, the dawn *will* come. Is it foolish to believe in the improbable? Well, as Christians, we believe that 2000 years ago, the God of the universe, left his throne in heaven, and came into this world as a vulnerable human baby born in a stable to a carpenter and his young wife. Have you heard of anything that is more unlikely, more improbable than that? And yet it happened.

And this should give us hope, that with God, the even the very unlikely, even the highly improbable, even the farfetched can come to pass.

Also, Christmas reminds us we can have hope because God loves us so much that he has come to be with us in the world, to share our humanity, to live and die as one of us. God loves us so much. Shouldn't that give us hope?

Finally, Jesus has promised to be with us always, to be present with us through all our days, through every year, good or bad, through every Christmas, happy or sad, joyous or lonely. God is with us always, to the end of time. This gives me hope and I trust it gives you hope.

So. Be alert. Stay awake. Open your eyes to see. That Christ is with us, that he keeps coming into our lives, day by day, moment by moment, in new ways, in unexpected ways. If only we pay attention enough to notice the signs.

Look, Christ is near, he is at the very gates, ready to come to you and to me. Open the gate and let him in. Amen.