

Sunday 3rd December 2017
Advent I (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 64.1-9
NT: I Corinthians 1.3-9
G: Mark 13.24-37

It is, perhaps, a human failing that we are always looking to the future. It is our glory as well, but I'll come to that later. As a failing, it starts in childhood. Just think back yourselves to your own childhood, and most of us spent some of our time wishing that we were grown up. To be honest, it is better. I'm having more fun now than when I was 10. But life continues like that: we eagerly await the next development and we keep planning. Financial planning is the same: we keep saving for a rainy day which often never comes, and in fact all it becomes is hoarding for the present. And even though I *am* having more fun now than when I was 10, I am quite looking forward to retirement. We keep looking to the future, although I note that no one really seems to look forward to death.

That interaction between past, present and future is an all-consuming occupation for humanity, but it is also a danger. The danger is that the past or the future dominate, and we forget to live in the present. In our Gospel reading we hear about the future. The evangelist writes, "when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates." The passage goes on with a stark warning: "Keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn." It is all very future oriented.

We all choose to live with an end in sight. This is really a philosophical idea, and explored in depth by the 20th century atheist philosopher Martin Heidegger who understood that our living is not alone, but is a companionship with ideas and concepts. We live with the concept of self and living, but more significantly we live with the knowledge that we shall die. This changes our behaviour and our outlook.

In the last couple of years one of my civic tasks has been to lead services around the city to dedicate a number of memorial stones for those who were awarded the Victoria Cross in the First World War. On the centenary of each act of courage, we have gathered to hear what happened and to celebrate the man. Four of those stones are in our Church Gardens,

and the final two stones were laid last week, one of which is just outside. The stories have been interesting, and have frequently led me to reflect on whether bravery is an act of courage or madness. For example, the stone to Sgt Cyril Gourley is now in the Gardens. The citation to his VC in 1917 included this description of his action: “Though frequently driven off he always returned, carrying ammunition, laying and firing the gun himself, taking first one and then another of the detachment to assist him. When the enemy advanced he pulled his gun out of the pit and engaged a machine gun at 500 yards, knocking it out with a direct hit. All day he held the enemy in check, firing with open sights on enemy parties in full view at 300 to 800 yards.” Brave or mad? I’m not sure. But the pattern which has been repeated again and again is that in the excitement and drama of war, men and women lived for the moment. They were not living towards death, but towards life, because death did not matter. That seemed almost inevitable. Heidegger writes in his monumental work, *Being and Time*, about being oriented towards death, and yet lived experience is that orientation towards death seems to exalt the glory of living in the present. There may be a more religious dimension to this which reflects the ages in which we live: I have just finished reading a book about Charles, the 16th century Emperor of Spain and also the Holy Roman Emperor. Despite an exciting and fun-packed military career, at the age of 54 he, rather uniquely, began to abdicate his various thrones, and he retired to a monastery to live out the rest of his life. We live towards death in different ways; our living of life takes different forms.

Living towards death is something we all do, but Heidegger’s description ends very much at the moment of death. As Christians our orientation towards death has a different timbre to it, because it is an orientation beyond death. Death was overcome by Christ, and the resurrection showed that death was no longer the last enemy. So living towards death means living towards the glory of God, living towards a new life.

So how does this help us to interpret the Gospel command to keep awake? It is a theme which St Paul, in our second reading, reinforces. Paul writes: “He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This is a very different theme from our first reading, where the prophet Isaiah hopes for the coming of God in order to bring an end to everything that is wrong in his world. He begins, “Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down...” This is the cry of someone who

finds it difficult to live in the present, and cannot live towards the future. He wants the future to intervene and change the present. This is the cry of desperation, and we find this call in the powerless and dispossessed. The future for them is something which can change them, if they cannot change themselves.

And maybe this applies to you. Maybe your life is so constrained that you cannot make your own decisions and form your own present, in which case you passively wait for the future to intervene. But this in itself is living towards the future. And maybe it is not so different from the powerlessness of life and death from the soldier in the First World War who acts with impulse, knowing that his present is entirely caught up by what is coming.

The realities of our present being, whether or not we feel we can exercise choice, are entirely conditioned by what we think happens next. In our Gospel reading we are encouraged to recognize this. 'Keep awake,' we are reminded. This changes how we live in the present, and in the spaciousness of *our* lives, which are not lived in the heat of war or the desperation of lack of choice, we do get to choose. Living outside the Gospel message is not a choice for tomorrow, but for today. Loving your neighbour, loving God, living for the sake of those around us – these are not choices for tomorrow, but for today. And so perhaps, in the end, we should be living with the recklessness of the courageous soldier, because all the careful plans we make for tomorrow are nothing when we understand that the future is something we are living today.

Whatever you have got stored up for tomorrow, do it today. Keep awake. But, most importantly, live today as you intend to be tomorrow. Whatever you would like to be tomorrow, be that person today. Keep awake!

Fr Crispin Pailing