**2nd December 2018**

**Advent Sunday**

**Luke 21.25-36; 1 Thess 3.9-13**

I read an article by Kate Hill[[1]](#endnote-1) an event organizer this week entitled ‘We must resist society’s pressure to have the perfect Christmas’.

She writes:

Stepping into my loft is like walking into Santas grotto. There are mounds of wrapping paper and decorations as well as boxes piled up full of gifts of clothes, toys books and more. Each box is labelled with the name of who the gifts are for. All that I’m missing are several elves running a production line. In my daughter’s case each box is labelled with the age that she will receive those gifts and at two years old, she’s covered until she’s four.

I have Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and my condition manifests in some very strange ways. One of these ways is by hoarding gifts. But I confess I am buying out of fear. I’ve become afraid of being unable to provide my daughter with the perfect Christmas that every voice around me seems to be saying she must have. The pressure from society is constant. Christmas Day must be perfect. I am trying to let go of this sense of pressure and realize the perfect Christmas has already happened and I should focus instead on the ultimate gift of the Prince of Peace.

One may be full of jealousy that someone has bought and wrapped their Christmas presents for the next three years. But one may not be jealous of the fear that has driven that behaviour.

Christmas is coming and of course it may be looked forward to with either a sense of joy or fear for whatever reasons.

Where can we find peace?

In the news this week have been many issues to make us fearful.[[2]](#endnote-2)

There have been further signs that our planet is being overwhelmed by human action, but we are not facing [the cost of the choices now needed](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/nov/27/world-triple-efforts-climate-change-un-global-warming)? More coal fired power stations are going up, more carbon dioxide is being released in the atmosphere and the biggest polluter, the United States, has President Trump dismissing the findings of scientific reports and  [drastically cutting funding for data gathering on climate change](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/27/climate-change-science-data-trump-administration-).

Will we care for our planet and be at peace with the earth?

Fears over Brexit have been in the news with the Bank of England Governor Mark Carney saying a no deal would lead to the worst recession since the 1930s, costing us £200 billion and a 30% drop in the value of your house. He has been accused of political meddling and launching not just Project fear but Project Hysteria.

Will we find a unity again as a nation in the light of Brexit? Where is the peace?

The rise of populism and the far right across Europe is also causing fears of a return to divisions and hatreds in society. The exhibition we have on display this week from Christian Aid tells the story of communities and peoples being uprooted through conflicts and hatreds, fighting and discrimination.

 More than 40 million people are displaced within their own country. They’re forced to flee their homes and seek safety, but they’re unable or unwilling to cross a border. 40 million is impossible to grasp. It would take us more than a year to read their names aloud – that’s without stopping to sleep. Even though they make up around two thirds of those who have been forced from home, the international community largely ignores them. They’re denied the official protection given to refugees. Although the UN and its member states are working on two new agreements on refugees and migrants, neither is tackling the problem of internal displacement.

Many personal stories:

Ayuba Azagwu is 49 years old and was a farmer in Borno state. He was wealthy, owning a lot of land which he rented out, and employing people to work on his land to get the best crops. Ayuba was used to being looked up to in his village and being able to help people when they were in need.

Ayuba owns a house with nine rooms and a bathroom which he used to rent out, but when Boko Haram came to his village he fled and took over the house. He used it to shelter others from his village. At first there were about 50 people living in the house, but as the situation got worse, he was sheltering 136 people. Now some have moved on to other communities and there are 58 people living there.

Ayuba is struggling with not being able to collect rent or farm his land. Without the security situation improving he is not able to farm and all his wealth he worked his life to build up has gone. He now describes himself as a poor man. His health hasn’t been good since having to flee.

Ayuba doesn’t regret helping his neighbours. Many of them are from his home village and he knew them before. He says, “they had no one else to help them but me. In the village I helped and it’s an obligation for me to help.”

Christian Aid has helped Ayuba with seven months of food which will help all those living in the home. Ayuba believes that if the security situation improves he can rebuild his life, his wealth and his health.

Where is the peace?

Advent is the time when we think about the Coming of Christ – God’s intervention into our mess, our sin, our fears, our hatreds. It is a time when we remember the coming of the Prince of Peace. It is also a time when we prepare for the Coming again of Christ, the judge of the living and the dead, to inaugurate a new heaven and a new earth.

There are powerful themes in Advent. Advent imagery is full of a sense of urgency: the days are surely coming (Jeremiah 33.14); there will be signs…now when these things begin…the kingdom of God is near…’ (Luke 21.25,28,31). God’s people are told to ‘be on guard’ (Luke 21.34), to be alert (Luke 21.36) and to attend to our hearts.

The world in which Jesus lived, times were troubled. The nature of God’s kingdom where the poor are fed and the rich are sent away empty can seem to be a long way away. It is however earthed in our daily decisions and choices. Advent brings us face to face with the challenge ‘stand up,’ and to be visible – to work for peace and justice.

People of God – we are called to wake up and to read the signs. We are called to recommit our energies to the things that have real value in the kingdom and to stand up. We are reminded that we are co-creators with God and not passive observers, whatever our age. Now is the time.

Now is the time for bold measures to tackle climate change – what will future generations say if we fail to act? Advent has a stern message for all who fail to see that ‘now’ shapes the future and in a very real sense the future therefore is also ‘now’. What is required of us? Simply that we stand up – that we become actively engaged.

Many people are pessimistic about the future. One theologian has observed (Neil Hamilton, who taught at Drew University for many years) how people in our time lose hope for the future. It happens whenever we let our culture call the shots on how the world is going to end. At this stage of technological advancement, the only way the culture can make sense of the future is through the picture of everything blowing up in a nuclear holocaust or over heating through global warming.

The world cannot know what we know, that everything has changed in the death and resurrection of Jesus, that the same Christ is coming to judge the world and give birth to a new creation. And so, people lose hope. As Hamilton puts it: This substitution of an image of nuclear holocaust or global warming for the coming of Christ is a parable of what happens to Christians when they cease to believe in their own eschatological heritage. (eschatological means the end things – what happens at the last). The culture supplies its own images for the end when we default by ceasing to believe in biblical images of God's triumph at the end.

The good news of the gospel is this: when all is said and done, God is going to win. So stand firm, keep alert. But that doesn’t mean passivism – doing nothing.

We are called to stay alert and be on guard. Those verbs are active. It doesn’t imply we sit back and do nothing and wait for the Lord to return. Some Christians particularly in America have a view of the rapture, the Second Coming of Christ, in which they welcome rather than try to avert a cataclysmic political conflict or environmental disaster, since they believe this must be a sign of the end and that Christians will be raptured to heaven and be with God forever, avoiding the suffering to come.

Their belief is based on a text from 1 Thessalonians 4.17 which says we who are alive will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord. The image Paul draws on here is one of the emperor’s coming on a royal visit to a city under his rule, and the elders of the city going out to welcome him and escort him to the gates of the city. The word ‘parousia’ Paul uses of Jesus’ coming would have been used of just such an imperial visit. In other words, when we meet the Lord in the air, we then turn to accompany him to the earth over which he is the rightful king, rather than turning to accompany us to heaven.

Jesus prays for God’s kingdom and God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. This is not about spiritual escapism of the earth’s realities – but being alert and being on guard to take our active part in God’s redemptive purposes in the world. Putting the world to right – overcoming evil with good.

During his 1960 presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy often closed his speeches with the story of Colonel Davenport, the Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives:   On May 19th, 1780 the sky of Hartford darkened ominously, and some of the representatives, glancing out the windows, feared the end was at hand. Quelling a clamor for immediate adjournment, Davenport rose and said, "The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish that candles be brought."

Rather than fearing what is to come, we are to be faithful till Christ returns. Instead of fearing the dark, we're to be lights as we watch and wait. Instead of cursing the darkness, light a candle. In places of conflict and fear: be a peacemaker.

May God help us to stand up and be counted for peace and justice.

1. Kate Hill, Premier Christianity Magazine Dec 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Diane Craven is a Reader in the Church of England, licensed to York Minster. She is a freelance education consultant and adviser in children’s spirituality.* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)