

## Prick up your ears

**Sermon for Advent Sunday, 3 December 2023**

**Readings** [Isaiah 64.1-9](#), [Mark 13.24-37](#)

Wouldn't it be good if God really showed up this morning? I mean, if he stopped moving in a mysterious way and really did something? Think what that would do to all the people not in church this morning – the 'it's-my-only-day-for-a-lie-in' brigade, the jetters-off for long weekends in search of winter sun, all the people who say, 'If I'm supposed to believe in God, then where is he?' – all of *them*. If God really did something this morning, they'd sit up and take notice, wouldn't they? Then, at the Advent Carols this evening – standing room only. I offer these thoughts not to as good and generous ways to think (they aren't) but to help us get inside the feelings of frustration and longing the prophet Isaiah gives voice to in the first reading.

Mind you, he and his people have bigger worries than filling pews. Our brothers and sisters in the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches of Israel, Gaza and West Bank are hearing this same reading this morning, and they will have no difficulty getting under the skin of it. Where is God? Where are the signs of God among us? O that you would tear the heavens and come down! Come on, Lord, rip the sky apart, make the mountains tremble. Then they'll see.

But – imagine you are one of Isaiah's people – if God really does come out of hiding, that will be a fearful moment for 'them' (whoever 'they' are) but won't it also be fearful for you too? Jesus seems to say so.

In the Gospel, Jesus tells his friends about the coming of the Son of Man. Again, try to hear these words as addressed to you – and they are unsettling. For a start, who is this 'Son of Man'? Is it Jesus, your friend? Or someone else? If it is Jesus, why not be clear about it? And there's more. When will the Son of Man come? There will be signs that he is near, but no-one knows exactly when he will arrive. No one? No – not even Jesus himself, only the Father knows.

But we do know, says Jesus, that when he comes it will be sudden. It won't be like the Covid-19 Inquiry with its five judgment days a week, where you know long in advance when you are to face the silky but scary [Hugo Keith KC](#). No – Jesus says it will be like the boss saying, 'You're in charge,' going away, and suddenly coming back out of the blue – evening, midnight, first thing. It will be like a phone call to one of our schools, 'Hello, this is Ofsted. How are you doing? Our inspectors arrive in the morning.'

What do you do at school or work when someone says the teacher's coming, or the boss is outside? You probably try to look – how to put it? – fully occupied. 'JESUS IS COMING – LOOK BUSY' says a T shirt you can still buy, but Jesus' own advice to his friends is not that. He is more concerned that they should be alert. He doesn't say, 'Keep busy' but 'Keep awake' (or, in vivid African American Vernacular English, 'Stay woke').

Keep awake, because then you may notice signs of God's approach, signs it is easy to miss if you are too busy doing things. Jesus says it's like pausing to notice the leaves on a tree in late Spring and their promise of approaching Summer; and his image of being asleep is not about being literally unconscious, but being unaware, not conscious of God's coming.

It's a teasing idea, to be busy and yet to be asleep. As if in our routines, the stuff we do, even the frantic stuff, we may be sort of sleepwalking.

There is a bit of fear in today's readings, and a fear I have just now is that some people at COP28, the climate summit in the UAE, are guilty of that kind of sleepwalking. Everyone's busy – speeches are made, nets worked, canapes consumed – but is everyone awake?

[The King spoke powerfully](#) on Friday to launch the conference. His words about unprecedented wildfires in Spain, Greece, the US and Canada, releasing clouds of greenhouse gases, recalled the darkened skies we hear about today in Jesus' prophecy. My fear is that he was heard – and yet not heard, the way even an urgent voice sounds distant when you are on the edge of sleep. And meanwhile the frantic sleepwalking of the movers and shakers and leaders and rulers goes on – doing deals, oiling wheels – all the while not really conscious of times we are in. That is my fear.

And so to us. Don't panic, but there are (counting today) 22 days to Christmas. There is much to do, stuff to buy, cards to write, work to finish, carols to sing and hear. Much activity and busyness. Much worry, too, for those of us for whom Christmas comes with a frightening price tag.

But let us be awake to what it is that we are getting ready for: God coming among us. Not just the memory that God did come among us when Jesus was born, not just the hope that God will come at the end of life or the end of the age, but the awareness of God coming to us all the time, in big things and small, in the words of friend or stranger; in an unbidden thought to ring that person or drop them a text; in moments that ambush you with a sudden twinge of guilt or sudden thrill of gratitude; in a morsel of bread in which you can taste all the fulness of God.

Each one is easy to miss – or dismiss – unless you are awake and alert. Jesus has an image for this, noticing new leaves on a tree. I have a sound for it. In fact, two sounds. At the end of the service, take a few moments to listen as Will [William Fairbairn, Assistant Director of Music] plays the cantata [Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland](#), 'Come, Saviour of the nations' by JS Bach [BWV 661]. It's one of his three takes on that text.

The organ begins with a slightly busy tune. For me, that tune is me, my activity, the stuff I do (less elegantly than Bach). That tune is us, our world, our busy, sometimes sleepwalking world.

That goes on for a bit, but then in comes another theme below it, literally below it because it's played on the organ pedals rather than the keyboards. This sound is slower, more measured, and strong. For me, that's God – noticed or unnoticed but always there, the grounding of it all. Can we be awake, be attuned to him?

Our task this Advent, when doing the shopping, writing the cards, sitting in the meeting, scrolling the phone, watching the news, is to look, to listen, to be alert: where are the signs that God is near? where are the pointers to what God wants us to be, and be doing? Our task is to prick up our ears to the theme of God beneath the busy tunes of the world.

What I say to you, Jesus tells us, I say to all: Keep awake.