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Sermon preached in Chapel on Advent Sunday 2019

Isaiah 7: 10-14 & Romans 8: 31-39

Advent Sunday, and the beginning of December which here at the Inn is the month of Miscellany, our annual theatrical show, so we might begin with a joke. Probably one I've told before. Moses comes down the mountain bearing the commandments on tablets of stone. He tells the people, "There's good news and bad news. The good news is that I've got him down to ten. The bad news: adultery is still in".

Advent is a season of good news, but the bad news comes first. Because Advent opens the doors not onto little bits of chocolate but onto the deeper questions of life. It calls us to face up to reality. And it's not afraid to speak about the four Last Things: Death, Heaven, Hell and Judgement. I was once in Los Angeles Cathedral on Advent Sunday and the preacher apologised that, in the run-up to Christmas, we had to hear about such dismal and discouraging things. But this season is very much about facing up to who we are and the mess we've made of things: "When the Lord comes he will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness, and will disclose the purposes of the heart".

Is Judgement good news or bad news? Some of you may say, professionally speaking, that Judgement is no bad thing. People must take responsibility for their actions, they must be called to account, they must pay the consequences. But that of course is judgement on other people. What happens when it's

judgement on us? Well of course we say – we’ve always tried to do our best and if we’ve slipped a little on the way God will forgive us because, as the German philosopher and poet Heinrich Heine said, “That’s his job”.

But, sadly, that’s not what the Bible says. The Epistle to the Romans, in particular, says something very different. So I now want to do some theology, which may be a little heavy, but if you stick with me for two or three minutes I promise you another joke at the end.

St Paul, who wrote the Epistle, starts with the fact that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”. We are all under judgement. Compared to who God is, and given what God requires of us, we are as guilty as hell, and hell should be our just desert. We are, as Private Fraser kept saying in ‘Dad’s Army’, “doomed.. totally doomed”.

Paul knew that the Old Testament People of God had been given the Law, showing very clearly what God demands, but in fact that only made matters worse because they now knew what they should do but manifestly failed to carry it out in practice. So the people were under judgement. As Donald Trump might tweet, “Bad, bad news”

Yet the Epistle to the Romans is also bumper packed with good news, the best of news. Why? For two reasons. First, Paul says that what we cannot do for ourselves, what we’ve manifestly failed to achieve by our own efforts, God has done for us. As we read just now “If God is for us, who is against us?” For there is nothing, nothing in the whole wide world, that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

And the key to that is this word “Emmanuel”. It means “God with us”. The great news that Advent brings is that God came, not as a judge, but as a baby.

We often say that the three Abrahamic faiths have a lot in common, and indeed they do. But Christianity is unique in claiming that God became one of us, shared our life, and our death, and made it possible for us to get right with God. For Jews this is nonsense. For Islam it's blasphemous.

But it's what the Christian Faith says. We stand before God as guilty. But God came to us – Emmanuel – and forgave us our sin. The fact is that most members of the Church of England would be much happier as Jews or Muslims, believing that we can manage on our own with some occasional help from God. For Christians, the bad news is that we can't. The good news is that we don't need to. God's forgiving love is primary and prevenient. As St Paul says elsewhere, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself". Emmanuel. God with us.

That's why we baptise babies. Not just as an expression of the love of God for everyone. But because God's action has come first. We don't wait until the baby is grown and they come to faith, although we hope that they will. Baptism represents what God has already done, in Jesus Christ. The baby in Bethlehem, the teacher by the Lake, the man hanging on a Cross... all signs of God's outgoing, overflowing, outpouring and forgiving love.

I said that there were two reasons why this season of Advent is good news. The second one is this, that in response to what God has done for us, he calls us to work with him in becoming better people ourselves, and in working together for a better world. It's a consequence of his love towards us, not a condition for receiving it. And such a commitment to action and obedience is one which is very much shared with Jews and Muslims.

What might that mean for us today? I hesitate to comment on the General Election (which is of course not a Christmas Election but an Advent Election).

As you know, I never touch on political matters from this pulpit! But it does seem to me that the word which is missing from all the manifestos and airy promises is Sacrifice.

The fact is that if you want to stop Climate Change you will have to accept a different lifestyle and a lower standard of living. If you want an NHS and Social Care that is fit for purpose most of us will have to pay higher taxes - or we borrow more, and leave your children and grand children to pay the bill. The good news is that a better, more just world is possible, but only if we are all prepared to make the sacrificial commitment.

So, to finish, I promised you another joke. An Advent joke. A Vicar arrived in his new parish to discover a lady who always sat in the front pew, and who (unlike your good selves) preferred short sermons. As he climbed into the pulpit she would take off her watch and place it on the ledge in front of her. It was the kind of church where they very actively shared the Peace (again, unlike your good selves) and on one Sunday during Advent he managed to lean over, pick up her watch and drop it into his cassock pocket. And then, with secret delight, he announced the next hymn "Lord, her watch thy church is keeping".

Advent is a time of watching, and waiting. And if we do so, we might find that Christmas, the birth of Emmanuel, God with us, is really the best news of all.