

Advent Sunday 29th November 2020

Jesus said, 'in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light.... Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in the clouds' with power and great glory: Mark 13 v 24.

I love the darkness of Advent. I love having permission not to be cheerful. I do not have a cheerful face. People sometimes say to me, 'Cheer up, it may never happen.' Before I became a saintly vicar, I might have considered thumping someone who said that. But when you become a vicar, there is a huge compulsion to **look** cheerful. If the vicar is not cheerful, what hope for the rest of us? So, one went around the parish in a dog collar and a silly smile, and faked interest in the conversation of every monumental bore who wanted to tell you what they would do if they were prime minister. 'You should never have been a priest', jokes my wife. I am comforted by the poet, Emily Dickinson:

'I like a look of agony because I know it's true.'

This is awful. Why am I talking like this? Let me now speak up for Advent happiness. My daughter's Christmas started on Sunday November 22nd with the tree, the lights and the decorations. She seems to have learned nothing from her father about the great Advent themes, death, judgment, hell and heaven. No Advent until Advent Sunday. No Christmas until Christmas Eve. Her partner, Sergio, wants the warmth of Christmas to last as long as possible, because he does know about darkness. Wherever Sergio goes he is in exile. Whenever he flies to his native Colombia, he weeps for leaving Martha and the three little ones. Whenever he leaves Colombia, he weeps because he will not see his mother and father and all his family for another couple of years. A Christmas which lasts 8 weeks helps. But not just for Sergio. It is said that the 21st century is the age of exile. The age of weeping and loneliness, far worse than his. The age which, without knowing it, longs for Emmanuel, God is with us. Or in the words of the Catholic prayer, 'after this, our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of your womb Jesus.'

Is the Church hard hearted towards people who want to be comforted and come to Mass to be protected from the nasty stuff? Well it was once. Listen to this poem. I am going to test the director of music to see if he knows who wrote it.

Dear Mother, dear Mother, the Church is cold,
But the Alehouse is healthy & pleasant &
warm; Besides I can tell where I am used well,
such usage in heaven will never do well.
But if at the Church they would give us some Ale.
And a pleasant fire, our souls to regale;
We'd sing, and we'd pray, all the live-long day;
Nor ever once wish from the Church to stray,
Then the Parson might preach & drink & sing.
And we'd be as happy as birds in the spring:
And modest dame Lurch, who is always at Church,
would not have bandy children nor fasting nor birch.
And God like a father rejoicing to see,
His children as pleasant and happy as he:
Would have no more quarrel with the Devil or the Barrel
But kiss him & give him both drink and apparel.

William Blake, a deeply religious poet, does not like church. He wants to meet God in the pub, with a pint of ale in his hands, in front of a warm fire. The church is about nasty scary morals. If only the vicar would join him in front of the fire, and with a pint in his

hand, sing along with the bawdy songs, who knows, God and the devil might even become friends. In another poem he has the lines, 'priests in black gowns were walking their rounds, and binding with briars, my joys and desires.'

Is that what the Church is for? To put a brake on people having fun. Well once upon a time it certainly was. And in many of us, our religion of **freedom from guilt** has left a huge residue of **continuing guilt**. What are we guilty of? Guilty of not working all hours that God sends us to help the needy. Guilty about sex, real or imagined. And much more besides.

So, what does the Church of the 21st century do to throw off the charge that we are here to stop people having fun. **We** have fun. We go about being happy. We now have jolly, cuddly bishops who everyone is supposed to love, smiley vicars, family services, endless jokes. People like me practising our smiles in front of the mirror. Towards the end of his life my father tried to learn to smile. What emerged was an awful grimace which terrified his grandchildren. But he was born in 1908. It was unnatural for him to smile in front of the children. Nobody ever smiled at him.

I read recently about a woman who left church because it was, she said, 'all too happy.' She did not mind hugging at the peace and hand waving. What she did mind was what she saw as the Church's **determination to conceal all traces of evil and conflict**.

So, we cannot win, can we? No. I think perhaps we can win. Consider 3 great composers.:

Were Bach and Mozart happy composers? If you listen to Classic FM, with all those cuddly presenters, the answer is clearly yes. Think of Mozart's most famous horn concerto. That is happy. And the silly jokes in his operas. Bach seems to be so optimistic. How come? Mozart did not really have a life. His father took him round Europe like a performing seal. He died in poverty at 36. Bach's wife gave birth to child after child who died as an infant. Why is their music so suffused with joy? Which is to say nothing of Schubert, who died of syphilis at the age of 31, and composed his greatest music when, and possibly because, he was dying. But what is it about happy Mozart and happy Bach?

They were great, not because of happiness but because of courage, which gave them something far richer than happiness. We call it joy. They somehow managed to gather up the tragedy into something bigger and richer. Without the tragedy they would have been lesser artists. There is an enormous yes at the heart of Mozart's music, says the theologian, Karl Barth, which has power and significance because it contains and overpowers a no.

And we say: ***The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.***
Amen