

27.11.2016
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Introduction

We enter Advent this week and spend a month of Sundays thinking about the festival of Christmas to come. Yet, one of the hardest things for any human to understand is our inability to predict the future. We even find it hard when we know pretty much 100% what is going to happen. We know in our rational minds that the chance of winning the National Lottery Jackpot is more than 45 million to one. This doesn't stop many people buying a ticket for a Saturday night and chatting about what they would do with the winnings. Just as we plan for the happy rare events, so we find it very hard to understand the randomness of unhappy events. Jesus warns to be vigilant while at the same time pointing out that vigilance in and of itself won't save us.

Text

Matthew 24:36-44

“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Comment

We may often view the Christian faith, especially as we come into Advent, as a syrupy and clichéd set of ritual behaviours. It is our ‘safe place’ a time of year when it is actually socially unacceptable to mention the harder times, the conflicts, the pain of life. We lie to children about Father Christmas, a magical man who can bring them anything they want. We dream of a perfect meal, perfectly cooked, and find ourselves bombarded by advertising on all sides. We spend money on decorations and lights. We buy presents and try with the little we do have to give good things to our children.

Ironically, Christmas is often a season of domestic abuse, arguments, conflicts and relationship break-down. As we set up a perfect idea of Christmas, and then find the reality wanting, how do we retain our faith? The seasonal rise in incidents of domestic abuse is well documented by shelters and by police alike. The double pressure of trying to celebrate as a family and escape from an abusive situation is a struggle that no-one should face.

Jesus talks of the bad times coming like a flood, of two people standing in a field and one being taken away. He talks of conflict, grief, loss and the suddenness with which it may strike. Some things in this life are very quick to happen and yet take a lifetime to mend.

One mother talks of her life with an abusive husband saying, 'Everyone ran round to make sure he didn't get upset. Hyper-vigilant to whether he was going to lose it.' The pressure to keep Christmas calm was so great but inevitably ended in her husband drinking and beating her. She escaped, her husband was eventually sentenced to seven years in prison and now she runs a refuge. She talks of her children losing a father, and of the repercussions of her trauma still being with her.

Two people grinding corn together, one may be taken, the other will be left, even when the leaving is a good and necessary thing, the parting has an effect. The violence in the home which divides and splits families cannot be predicted. Just as Jesus speaks of end times and troubles we know through personal experience that we cannot predict the troubles which will come our way, and even those who have had a similar trouble to ours will not have had the same experience.

Conflict does not always bring catastrophe but it may do. Once catastrophe has struck, it is very hard for us to cut our losses and move on, move away. No-one deserves, asks for or chooses domestic abuse. The hope it might not happen again may keep a person too long in an abusive relationship, but that is no criticism of that individual. There can be no blame laid at the door of the victim when the assailant is a fist. When we have invested so much in any situation, however bad it is, we find it hard to break free. If troubles come to us unawares, in the same way, Jesus says, will the Son of Man. The solutions, redemptions, restorations may present themselves at unexpected times or in unexpected ways.

To break free from abuse at Christmas is hugely challenging and difficult thing for any person. But perhaps it is also the moment when we see that life could be different, that things could be better. Perhaps the happy adverts of 'perfect' families on TV fuel the unacceptable rage of the abuser, but maybe for a few the message of hope also empowers the hand of the person who lifts the phone and asks for help. We cannot know, but we do know that the gospel itself is as sudden, hard, and strong as life is unfair and the hope it offers is powerful, if not always apparent to us in our darkest hours.

Response

Some people repeat the sentiment that God does not give us burdens we cannot carry. Question for yourself whether this is true? Is having an easy or bearable life something we can take credit for? Is it a gift from a Santa Claus like God who hears our wishes? Or is the story of Christmas more robust than that. Was the baby Jesus also born for the people who have been completely broken in our society? And if that's true, what is the challenge in the truth?

OR

what can you or your community of faith do for victims of domestic abuse this Christmas? Is there a shelter, a helpline or a charity you could support? what would be the challenges in making this response for Christmas this year?

Prayer

Dear God,
Enable me, this advent, to think about my words,
And the unknown situations I might speak them into,
So let me listen, with compassionate ears.
May I work to end violence and abuse
wherever I can.
Grant me compassion, tact and love as I share the liberating gospel,
Of your birth and life on earth,

AMEN