

Today as we start a new year, and a new Advent – and there is a sense of expectation and hope – a sense of longing of what is to come. I have learnt to love this time of year in London – it is so different from Sydney – where the days are long and hot. But here where the days are short and dark the advent theme of watching and waiting takes on a new meaning. Most of our Advent liturgies are based on this sense of longing for light to come into the darkness.

Last night many of us attended the Advent Procession at St Paul's Cathedral – a service which makes the most of our darkness and the symbolism of the light of Christ being brought into our midst. Songs of yearning and longing – not just for the birth of Christ but also for the time when he will come again and the world will be transformed. We often steer away from this idea of the Jesus return I suspect because it is not comfortable to talk about – and yet the structure of Advent ensures that all of the church begins its advent journey with this very thought.

Transformation, and the yearning for light has been a strong theme in this building this week. Those of you who were here last Sunday will remember that we had a leak – or rather a deluge of water through a pipe into two upstairs rooms and into the ground floor. This continued into Monday, so that by Monday lunchtime I was standing in the rain outside with 4 plumbers looking at a hole in the ground, wondering if we would ever find the source of the problem. We did eventually find it – and since Thursday I think we are water proof-ish. Though there has been much removal of carpet and there are three rooms currently which we cannot use and have interesting drying machines in them.

But as I kept looking at the weather forecast of the week, and wondering if we could stop the water getting in before it rained again, a song kept going through my head

*If I had words  
To make a day for you  
I sing you a morning golden and new  
I would make this day*

*Last for all time  
Give you a night  
Deep in moonshine<sup>1</sup>*

For a few days, I thought this was a sign that I had finally gone mad – until sat and thought about the words. They are words of longing for a new day, and brighter day – words of hope and longing – words in fact for Advent season. And then on Friday morning, as Sue and I sat and prayed together at morning prayer, the psalm set for the day was Psalm 139 – it is one of my favourites – it is a song about God's knowing of us..

*O LORD, you have searched me and known me.  
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;*

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.lyricsfreak.com/y/yvonne+keeley+and+scott+fitzgerald/if+i+had+words\\_20876502.html](http://www.lyricsfreak.com/y/yvonne+keeley+and+scott+fitzgerald/if+i+had+words_20876502.html)

*you discern my thoughts from far away.  
You search out my path and my lying down,  
and are acquainted with all my ways. <sup>2</sup>*

And in these words, and the reflections upon the darkness of the week, I was reminded of God's hope. Our insurers and the restoration team have been telling me all week – things could have been much worse; and on Friday I felt that God was saying the same thing as we prepared to enter Advent. God says to each of us, I know you, I know your longing, and know your hoping, and I also know the darkness you face – but we will walk this path together.

One of the commentaries I was reading in preparation for Advent suggests that Advent should be a time for telling stories of Good News. That the stories of longing and waiting, the stories of our lives, the stories of our encounters with God, form part of the Advent story. During Advent we hear the story of Mary, of Joseph, of prophets and shepherds and kings, as well as of stable animals – and it is also a time for us to tell our stories of our encounter with this baby Jesus, and the adult Jesus whom we follow and have become disciples of. And yet today, on this first Sunday of Advent, our readings don't seem to be about the hope or light of waiting, rather they seem quite dark! – but it does contain promise.

According to the over-all design of the three-year lectionary, the Gospel texts for the First Sunday are always apocalyptic, anticipating the second coming of Christ.

In the coming weeks the readings explore the preaching and ministry of John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Messiah's first coming; the annunciation and then the Nativity. In 4 weeks we move from dramatic visions of the ends times, to the more-tender Nativity.

The reading from Mathew today contains a lengthy discourse in which Jesus speaks of last things – and it is the fifth time in the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus speaks of these things. Matthews' Jesus wants us all to understand that Jesus time on earth is not the end, and there are many things – including things which will be hard for us to come.

There are two strong elements to the narrative which Jesus presents in this passage, and which is picked up also in the readings we heard from Isaiah and Romans – the first is that of promise. It can be easy to miss in all the vision of the apocalypse, but Jesus gives a promise that when he comes he “will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (24:31). Everything else that is said must be heard in light of this promise.

The second issue is the sheer *unexpectedness* of the events Jesus talks about. No one knows, he says in today's passage – neither angels nor even he himself – no one knows when this will take place except the Father. And it's this element of the uncertainty, even unpredictable element of life that offers a point of entry, which

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 139v 1,2

will resonant not only with what we hear from scripture, but also in our lives here in this community.

And so it is that within this season of promise and also within the unexpectedness of our world – that we come to share stories of good news – and to follow a Jesus who knows us; and also longs of us to have a new day – golden and new.

And today we begin a new story. Our lives of faith are marked out in different points and the start of this story, for many, is our baptism. In our baptism we are anointed with sacred oil which reminds us that God knows us – since our very beginning. In our baptism we are plunged into the darkness of the water and draw out with promise of the new day.

The symbolism of the waters of baptism, as we have discussed before, is that in the ancient world what was beneath the water was unknown and so to be plunged into the water – into the unknown – and then to emerge into the new day was the promise of God’s love and hope – as well as cleansing us from the old and embracing the new way of living.

And then in our baptism we receive the light of Christ – and light which draw us forward and is with us all the days of our life. These are strong symbols of the Christian faith, and they also are strong images of Advent. The promise of God in our lives – the promise of light and hope – the promise of the stories of good news even in a world of darkness.

This is why we have a solid commitment to baptism being part of our Sunday worship – and not a small private family affair. Baptism brings us into the community of faith – and as congregation we make a commitment to help in raising Orla, and all new Christians, in the faith. We commit to ensuring that there is a worshipping community for them to be part of. Our theology means that none of us are called to faith in isolation – Christianity is a faith which calls us into community - to be the body of Christ. It is our community that upholds the promise that God is offering and allows us to explore more fully this relationship with God. It is also the place we can share our stories of Good news– and be honest about our hopes, and even our fears.

As we begin our Advent journey together, as we welcome Orla into the community of faith. May we remember the promises we hear today – the invitation to share good news and to welcome the promise of light in the darkness. And let us hear also the promise of Matthew – that Jesus will come again, and is with us now – whatever this journey holds for us. It is a journey that will hold promise and at times unexpectedness. But is our journey and we are not alone. Amen