

Sunday 6th December 2020

A sermon for the 2nd Sunday of Advent by Chris Webb

Readings:

Isaiah 40.1-11

Peter: 3.8-15a

Mark: 1.1-8

PEACE

Today on this second Sunday of Advent we are invited to consider peace.

I am not a film buff, but when I am watching a film, I am often impressed by the way in which a good film director can make a point. Not that I always understand what the point is; although sometimes it is the ambiguity which is intriguing.

Just two or three weeks ago I was watching a film on television. At one point the camera was at ground level, focused on a metal colander which was gently rocking from side to side; gradually slowing down. It had not quite stopped rocking when the film cut away to another scene. The camera was focused on that colander for a full 30 seconds -which in a film, felt a very long time. The film director was obviously making a point. But what point?

'Is he off his rocker?' I hear you say (did you get that by the way -rocker/rocking?) Why tell us about a 30 second clip of film showing a colander?

The film was the first in a series, directed by Steve McQueen, under the title of 'Small Axe'. The particular film was called, 'The Mangrove' and was about a restaurant and meeting place set up by a West Indian in Notting Hill, London, in the 1970's. It became a real social hub for the predominantly West Indian community in the area at that time -perhaps a little bit like the idea we have in mind for St. Nicholas- to become a social hub serving our community in our own time and our own place.

The film was based on a true story. The Mangrove was to be the subject of repeated violent police raids, each based on the flimsiest of reasons, taking place over a period of eighteen years and the motivations for which were entirely racial prejudice and vindictiveness. The rocking colander scene came at the end of a violent police raid in which the place was trashed, people verbally and physically abused, furniture upended, equipment smashed; pots and pans – and of course that colander, sent flying,

After several police raids of a similar character, some of those who ran and frequented the restaurant organised, a small- scale street protest cum demonstration against the racial prejudice of the local police. Some were arrested. The Mangrove 9 as they were to become known, were put on trial -at the Old Bailey – a place usually reserved for really serious criminal cases, charged with riot and affray, offences which could carry a sentence of up to ten years in prison. They were charged with some lesser offences as well.

After a 55 day trial they were all acquitted (you might think, against the odds, but thank heaven for British justice!) of the serious charges and were given suspended sentences for the minor ones. At the end of the film after all of the tension of the trial and ultimate acquittal there is a conversation in which one person, standing outside The Mangrove after a night of celebration, voices the opinion that they had won the battle but not the war. How right, given that the persecution of the

community at that restaurant was going to last for eighteen years during which time there would be three criminal trials -all of which led to acquittals.

Which brings me back to that rocking colander. What might it mean? In the aftermath of that really violent police raid when the whole place was trashed – furniture turned over, equipment smashed and the cooking pots- not to mention the colander were sent flying- the gentle rocking of it could denote calm and peace after the horrendous noise and violence that had taken place there. How wonderful it can feel when after a period of turbulence peace and calm are restored. The rocking could denote the length of time it might take for the dust truly to settle. And with the events in the news this year and – in France again just over a week ago we know that the dust has far from settled in the field of race relations. The fact that the film cut away before the colander came to a rest could denote that peace and harmony might never quite be established. You may come up with some other ideas.

In Luke's gospel we read about the appearance of angels to shepherds announcing the birth of the long-expected Messiah -the anointed one. The chorus of angels sang:
'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
And on earth **peace** among those
Whom he favours.' (Luke 2: 14)

The history of the relationship between God and his chosen people was one of oscillation. Oscillation on the part of the people. Not God. Growing closer, then apart again. Closer and apart. Using that picture of the colander moving from side to side God is the eternal constant - just like the pull of gravity calling it to come to rest.

"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." Said St. Augustine of Hippo

In the opening of his Gospel Mark draws our attention to words which come (mostly) from chapter 40 of Isaiah. As a result of falling away from trusting in God and following in His ways, disaster had come upon His chosen people. Jerusalem had been sacked and the elite and the skilled people had been carted off to exile in Babylon where they had remained for several decades. Now at last there comes a message of hope. " Comfort, O comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid." The great Babylonian empire was to be defeated by the new power on the block led by the Persian king Cyrus, who was to release the Jewish people and allow them to return to Judah and put them on the road to rebuilding Jerusalem and their beloved Temple. That would be the hope. Peace and restoration. That hope and restoration was fulfilled...for a time. Peace at last?

And yet, and yet...We know well that history was going to repeat itself, as indeed it still seems to be repeating itself. But not quite. And herein lies our own hope. Hope of peace. A perfect and eternal peace, not merely cessation of hostilities, as in, "We have won the battle but not the war." The establishment of God's kingdom of peace is what we look forward to on this second Sunday of Advent.

It is when we as individuals, as a nation and as all the nations – all people of the world are reconciled with God that true rest, true peace will have been achieved. The birth of Jesus was THE time in the history of the world that the process of reconciliation of humankind with God was – well, I was going to say initiated. That's not true. It's what God has been seeking throughout the ages and all the time meeting resistance. The birth of Jesus, his subsequent death on the cross and resurrection was to be

the pivotal moment when it was made clear to all who would see, that all of the obstacles which could hold us back from the intended relationship with God were set to be put aside; Notwithstanding all that had gone before, or come to that, what might happen in the future.

The first words of Jesus that we hear in Mark's gospel are, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15). If the 'universal' colander of humanity was still rocking from side to side, now was the time when that irresistible force was being brought into play and humankind was firmly set on a course towards coming to "the day of God" as Peter, in his letter describes it. The time of **righteous** judgment when through God's grace and not through any human merit, all things will be made well through His free giving of unearned, unmerited and wonderful forgiveness. The time when, to use the words of Julian of Norwich, "all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

Peter, in his letter addresses the concerns of those who wondered why this great day when all shall be well had not yet come. Just as we might still wonder today! He has an answer.

"But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance...what sort of people ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God...?.In accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home." (2 Peter 3:vv 8-14).

And in those words, I find a convincing description of heaven and earth being at peace. A place where '**righteousness is at home.**'

In his sermon on Zoom last Sunday John Simpson used the expression –'living in the interim' as part of his exploration of what it means to hope. That idea of 'living in the interim' chimes so well with the question that Peter raises in his letter. "What sort of people ought we to be, in leading lives of holiness and godliness?" (until the day of God comes -until true peace is established).

In this season of Advent, a time of waiting and preparation, a time of active waiting and preparation, let us spend time to ponder in our hearts -and act out in our lives- what it means for us individually and as a team, to live lives of holiness and godliness waiting for **and hastening** the coming of the day of God; as people of hope and peace? As people who are called to bring hope and peace to the people who live with us in our own communities.

"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

Amen