

Advent 4: 'The Knock At The Door'

Our Advent season draws to a close on this 4th Sunday as we near the celebration of the day when God is pictured as knocking on the world's door through the birth of Jesus. Will we hear the knock amidst all the revelry and distractions? Having opened the door, will He be made welcome? Some of us have gone to the door so many times before, we wrongly think we know full well who it is that's knocking.

Our Advent wreath (or crown?), with its four candles, each marking a different gift, reminds us of what is delivered at Christmas through the birth of Jesus. For those that may have missed the explanations as each candle was lit, let's have a recap. The first represented 'Hope', the 2nd, 'Peace', the third 'Joy'.

Today, we give thanks in anticipation for the gift of 'Love', arguably the greatest of them all. Love should lie at the heart of our celebrations. Love, that mysterious quality that radiates from the gaze of parents towards child, shepherds towards manger, kings towards child in our Christmas cards: that adds volume and passion to our carol singing.

Our gospel was Luke 3 v. 39-45 and is the story of a visit made by Mary to Elizabeth, her much older country cousin: both were pregnant. There appears to be an important detail missing from Luke's story. When you visit a friend's house, what's the first thing you do? Do you just barge in and surprise your friends? No, you knock politely on the door to let those inside prepare to greet you. Either Mary was rather rude and forgot to knock or so excited that she forgot the formalities. Mary's sudden appearance may then have caught her cousin 'on the hop': the shock may even have triggered those movements of the baby in Elizabeth's womb. Once the shock was over, all the elements of Advent were on show:

Peace as they embraced each other as close friends;

Joy as Elizabeth feels her own baby alive and kicking in her womb;

Hope: as Elizabeth reassures Mary that she will give birth to Jesus according to the vision she had had.

Love- capping them all, grounds for Hope, Peace and Joy.

[At this point we sang a hymn by Fred Kaan that neither I nor the congregation could remember singing before "Put peace into each other's hands". The words appear below and it scans to the tune St Columba, if you want to try it. The words sum up the feelings released as Mary and her cousin clasped hands and embraced.]

Three things struck me in that Gospel that I hadn't noticed before, when Mary went knocking (or should have!) on Elizabeth's door

1. What it says about the character of Mary: the picture I had before was of a vulnerable girl who kept herself to herself and obediently waited for God to work out the promise, delivered by an angel. Not-a-bit-of-it! Here's a spirited, independent, young woman, making a risky journey, ignoring the glances and comments of off-duty Roman soldiers.
2. Mary may have already confided in Elizabeth the details of her vision concerning her unborn baby. There is neither need nor reason to read in some sort of telepathic communication or divine intervention, whereby she was appraised of the remarkable turn of events. Mary was not so independent that she closed her mind to the advice to be gained from an older, wiser woman, in her condition.
3. Luke seems to acknowledge that God is ahead of the curve of events. Long before the spectacle of Pentecost, his indwelling Spirit makes an appearance in v. 41. Was this another spectacular show-stopper or was Elizabeth realizing that God's indwelling spirit had been there all the time?

When someone knocks at our door unexpectedly, we are immediately filled with

curiosity? Who can that be? What are they bringing? What do we owe? More often than not, it's a huge disappointment in our house at this time of year. It's the driver of a white van, wanting us to take a parcel in for neighbours who are not at home. We did have a nice surprise the other day: neighbours who had left Penicuik over 20 years ago knocked to see how we were getting on.

Some of the things we have said and done these last weeks may have put together a false image of the God who knocks at our door. He doesn't expect debts to be settled but and does expect us to be there to receive the gifts He bears. Advent proceedings can seem either to echo past knocks or be vague hopes that the caller will knock again. There's a touch of pantomime about it all, especially the school nativity: parents go weak-kneed and tearful over the performance of their own children, who alone they see on stage. Plays that do manage to make the point that God made himself at home here on earth as Jesus leave most parents going home thinking ('Oh No He Didn't'). Parents may also look at the way some Christians in the audience observe Christmas and can't see any difference from their own celebrations.

[At this point we sang a carol that pokes and prods at the complacency of some Christians as they prepare to celebrate Christmas: "Standing in the rain, knocking on the window", words also below. The carol seems to imply that some are sleep-walking their familiar, prejudiced way to another Christmas Day! Surely not! It is parody and satire, pointing up the worst of Christian behaviour at Christmas]

Those words of Fred Kaan do far more than express the sentiments of Elizabeth and Mary. For me, they express the full meaning of the birth of Jesus; of Incarnation; of Emmanuel-God with us. Peace is put into our hands to be treasured, keeping us in touch with creation; it compels us to share and care; express love in actions, not mere words. The words are not just an echo of the past but a thrilling voice that calls us to change our ways and ideas during Advent

today Another, contemporary voice, that of Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal priest and wisdom teacher, encourages us to look to ourselves for the grounds of hope. Here's what she wrote in her 2001 book, 'Mystical hope: trusting in the mercy of God'

'The source of our hope dwells deep within us and flows to us with an unstinting abundance, so much so that it might be more accurate to say we dwell within it ---- when we touch this innermost ground [within our own selves] it floods forth into our being as strength and joy. Hope is divine love itself—coursing through our being like lightning finding a clear path to the ground. . . .

When Elizabeth heard Mary's knock at the door, that lightning struck. When God comes knocking on Christmas Eve, it can strike again. They say 'lightning never strikes twice in the same place': this spiritual lightning doesn't need to: having struck it never goes away.

Neville

Put peace into each other's hands
and like a treasure hold it;
protect it like a candle flame,
with tenderness enfold it.

Put peace into each other's hands
with loving expectation;
be gentle in your words and ways,
in touch with God's creation.

Put peace into each other's hands,
like bread we break for sharing;
look people warmly in the eye:
our life is meant for caring.

As at communion, shape your hands
into a waiting cradle;
the gift of Christ receive, revere,
united round the table.

Put Christ into each other's hands,
he is love's deepest measure;
in love make peace, give peace a chance
and share it like a treasure.

Fred Kaan

Chorus: *Standing in the rain,
knocking on the window,
knocking on the window on a Christmas Day.
There he is again, knocking on the window
Knocking on the window in the same old way*

No use knocking on the window,
there is nothing we can do, sir.
All the beds are booked already;
there is nothing left for you, sir

No use knocking on the window:
some are lucky, some are not, sir.
We are Christian men and women,
but we're keeping what we've got, sir!

No we haven't got a manger.
No we haven't got a stable.
We are Christian men and women,
always willing, rarely able.

Christ the Lord has gone to heaven.
One day he'll be coming back, sir.
In this house he will be welcome,
but we hope he won't be black, sir.

Wishing you a merry Christmas.
We will now go back to bed, sir.
Till you woke us with your knocking –
we were sleeping like the dead, sir!