

**The Cathedral Church of the Redeemer**  
**The Second Sunday of Advent, year 'B'**  
**4 December 2011**  
**The Rev'd Leighton Lee**

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Our liturgy began this morning with the Litany in Procession. Some of you will have noticed the titles of the various sections of the Litany. There are prayers of approach to God, prayers for deliverance, prayers recalling Christ's saving work and prayers of intercession. All of the prayers – I should properly call them petitions – are cast in language that is not exactly comforting! They are the words of people who are crying out for mercy, for deliverance and for comfort, and as such we would rather not hear them. We spend much of our time pretending that everything is fine, that we can figure things out for ourselves and solve our own problems. And since we spend so much of our time pretending that *we aren't* in need of mercy, deliverance and comfort, we shrink from having our utter helplessness thrust into our faces. We would rather not face the fact that we stand mute before the solemn mysteries of life.

We heard in our reading from Isaiah a familiar verse: *A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?"* What shall I cry? We all ask the question. Is our only answer, "Good Lord deliver us"? Or is it that of the bearded religious nut of popular imagination who wears a sandwich board with a message of judgement: "Repent! The end is nigh." Or maybe our answer is altogether softer, an answer designed to give assurance that Jesus is coming and everything's going to be all right. Perhaps none of these options quite does it: we are loath ask God for deliverance, to say nothing of proclaiming a stentorian note of judgement or facile pious lollipops. So what shall we cry?

Some of us cry out by nervously filling the air with an unending stream of mindless blather. Others of us cry out tediously and pompously, thinking there's nothing so wonderful as the sound of our own voices or so sensible as our homespun wisdom. We love to talk, to be experts, to give advice, to chatter away noisily. But do we really say anything of value? Do we do anything except fill the room with more hot air? And yet here I am, six feet above contradiction, and I'm the one talking – what shall I cry? What *can* I say?

I understand all too well the sentiments of the prophet who stands agape before God and who asks, "What shall I cry?" What words do I have, or you for that matter, to offer to the world which cries and groans for mercy? It is difficult – impossible, to know what to say. But a clue has been provided in our texts this morning. They say actions speak louder than words. If this is true what are we saying to the world? We all know that Advent is a time for preparation, but not the kind of preparation that manifests itself in busy-ness and a whirlwind of activity. It is a time of preparation

when we strain to listen for the baby's cry in the night that will tell us once again that God has come among us.

But that baby's cry became the cry of a thousand babies slain in Ramah just as it became the cry of dereliction from the man on the cross. We hear the cry and we cannot help reflecting that the goodness, joy and beauty of this world are so often corrupted, perverted and debased. The cross of Calvary casts a long shadow across the ages. Is *this* what we've all been waiting for so long? Is there nothing else? Is this the answer?

In 1946 Benjamin Britten composed his opera *The Rape of Lucretia*. It is an unsavoury story about a virtuous and noble Roman lady who is raped by the upstart and vile Etruscan king Tarquinius. Devastated after her violation, Lucretia is unable to face her husband and kills herself. At the end of the opera, the Female Chorus cries out:

*Is it all? Is all this suffering and pain  
Is this in vain?  
Does this old world grow old  
In sin alone?  
Can we attain  
nothing  
But wider oceans of our own tears?  
And it, can it gain  
nothing  
But drier deserts of forgotten years?  
For this did I  
See with my undying eye  
His warm blood spill  
Upon that hill  
And dry upon that Cross?  
Is this all loss?  
Are we lost?  
Answer us  
Or let us  
die in our wilderness. Is it all? Is this it all?*

Is this it all? Did the first Advent of the Prince of Peace mean only that we, and the world, will continue to have nothing but wretchedness and pain and misery? It is hard to cry out anything in the face of the grim news of the world, and anyone of normal sensibility must feel that the sheer weight of horror, darkness, and pain rules out forever the possibility of the universe being ordered by divine love: the grim missions of terrorists, the spectre of war, the collapse of the economy. There is surely nothing we can say that can be set in the scales to balance that hideous load. And yet, and yet...

In Britten's opera, the Male Chorus replies to the anguished cry of the Female Chorus with the only answer there is:

*It is not all. Though our nature's still as frail  
And we still fall,  
And that great crowd's no less  
Along that road,  
endless and uphill;  
for now  
He bears our sin and does not fall  
And He, carrying all  
turns round  
Stoned with our doubt and he forgives us all.  
For us did He  
live with such humility;  
For us did He  
die that we  
might live, and He forgive  
Wounds that we make  
and scars that we are.  
In his Passion  
Is our hope  
Jesus Christ, Saviour. He is all! He is all!*

The counterweight is not our words at all, of course, but the God who came as *the Word* and who, by his life and example is the answer to our question, "What shall I cry?"

We shall cry out, not in words, but in action, through the living of our lives. This Advent we are preparing again to live like Jesus. It's hard to do this, for to live like Jesus means that we must live wildly in self-offering as he did, and thereby help to answer the world's cries of agony. The form this wild self-offering will take for you or for me I cannot tell. But this I can tell: that you wouldn't be here, and I wouldn't be here with motives (as they are with all of us) mixed, and with emotions (as they are in all of us) mixed up, if we weren't somehow aching to hear again the message of the angels and longing to go again to Bethlehem and see this thing which has come to pass. We are aching to see the path he trod and longing to walk in his footsteps, for we know, as if by some homing instinct, that the answer to the question, "What shall I cry?" is found by seeing him and by following him. Though we may still cry out, "Good Lord, deliver us," it is by following – however tentatively and clumsily – that we proclaim our Advent hope to the world: that the darkness won't last forever, that peace isn't an illusion, that love is always being born among us, that we expect the gift this Christmas that changes everything, and that actions *do* speak louder than words.

*Lord, save us from offering simplistic and predictable answers to the world's deepest questions. Enable us to open ourselves so that we may follow where you lead, that by living in a way that is patterned after your example, we may be living answers of your love, hope and peace. Amen.*