

## **Advent Sunday 2011 Canon Robert Innes**

Today is a joyful occasion as we gather to celebrate the birth of Kevin and Justyna's baby son and to baptize him into membership of the church. As an international family...a Polish mother, a Welsh father, Kevin and Justyna had to think hard about how to name their third child. His middle name, Llewlyn, is a fine Welsh name that means shining one, leader. It's the name of a renowned Welsh hero, the 12<sup>th</sup> century king Llewlyn the Great. With the encouragement of Pope Innocent 3<sup>rd</sup>, Llewellyn defeated the English King John and united a large part of North and Mid Wales under his control. Ever since then, defeating the English whether on the battlefield or the rugby field has been an important feature of Gallic consciousness. But if Llewlyn is a name from Welsh culture and tradition, Eliaz is a fine Polish name with roots in the Hebrew Bible. We may recognise this name better as Elijah, the famous Old Testament prophet. The name means "My God is Yaweh", El-Yah, "My God is the Lord". In his baptism, baby Eliaz has confirmed the meaning of his name: you his parents and godparents made promises that that his God will be the Lord, and the Lord claims this child as his own and extends his protecting grace over him.

We baptize Eliaz on a significant day, Advent Sunday. Advent means 'coming' and we look forward today to the coming of God, as a baby in Bethlehem, and more especially to his coming again in glory as our Lord and judge. We use the colour purple in our church, as a sign of penitence and preparation, and our Bible readings and our music express the longing that Christ may come and bring in his kingdom of justice and peace. Advent Sunday is a day for engaging with the future – something that comes naturally when we are focusing on a baby whose life is all ahead of him.

Today's gospel reading is a bewildering one with its signs in the heavens and its vision of the end of all things. It's not always easy to relate to this apocalyptic style of writing. But it helps, as often in reading the Bible, to start by considering what the passage meant in its original context. Mark chapter 13 addresses one of the most terrible times in Jewish history, the destruction of the temple and the destruction of the city of Jerusalem. We know that in AD 70 the Roman Emperor Titus laid siege to Jerusalem and successfully defeated a zealot revolt. It's said that he attacked the main defensive fortress whilst the zealot guards were asleep. He desecrated the temple before razing it to the ground stone by stone. He cut down all the trees in the city and then set fire to the place. Huge numbers of Jews were killed either by starvation in the siege or by Roman swords. It was the end of the Jewish nation as they knew it. So Jesus speaks into this end time, and into future times of apocalyptic distress and into the end of all things. And his aim is to give people spiritual resources to cope.

First of all Jesus encourages confidence in the future, he encourages hope. None of us is short of reasons to be pessimistic about the future. And some people despair of the future. But that can never be a wholly Christian attitude. Speaking to first century Jewish Christians whose whole world was about to fall around them, or which had already fallen, Jesus nevertheless exhorts them to be confident. "Heaven and earth may pass away", he says, "but my words will never pass away." Underneath it all are the everlasting arms. The God who holds the cosmos also holds you.

Of course disaster strikes people today as it did in the first century. In the ministry of this church, we are meet people whose lives are humanly speaking terribly broken and

disordered. People stranded in a foreign city with health problems, money problems, legal problems. People for whom you might humanly speaking say there is little hope... Yet we can still stand alongside them, and we can still pray for them. And that is not a cop out. It is to say that God alone can save. There are some things and situations we simply have to commit to him because they are too big for us to sort. And the season of Advent reminds us that God will come again and that in his timing and in his good purposes things will be put right. And even those whose lives and circumstances have gone terribly wrong will be healed and saved. As a children's chorus puts it: "our God is a great big God and he holds us in his hands."

Now a little baby like Eliaz is *completely* dependent on his parents for his wellbeing. And when you are a little child, you suppose that your mum and dad are all-powerful and all-competent. But all too soon as we grow we come to realise that our parents are not infallible and sadly there are some things they can't do for us. Our *parents* are weaker than we had thought. What first century Jewish-Christians came to realise was their *country* was weaker than they had thought. They thought it was invincible. After all they were God's chosen people and the temple had stood for a thousand years. Yet there nation was, in fact, helpless, if the Romans chose to attack. They could be crushed, and they were.

We, in our century, are perhaps realising that our own nation states are weaker in the face of global pressures than we had thought. The pressures we face in Europe are not so much military at the moment as financial. We are vulnerable to *global* pressures. Market sentiment, loss of financial confidence, inability to borrow money at competitive rates can quickly overwhelm individual countries. How extraordinary, that in two countries, Italy and Greece, the usual democratic processes for electing leaders have been set aside because of these pressures. And here in Belgium, we too are now suffering the negative judgements of the rating agencies.

These are worrying times. But in this context, even when the usual supports and familiar sources of security are shifting, we as Christians can know a basic sense of security in our faith. We know experience a sense of reliable dependence upon God, in the same way that Eliaz has a reliable dependence upon his parents. This is not as an escape from the world but to give us a confident hope for acting in the world. For this kind of dependence upon God isn't – as the atheists would tell us - the projection of a childish illusion: it is the basic condition for finding meaning in our lives and for waking up each morning with hope rather than despair.

Jesus encourages confident hope, even when times are hard, and he secondly encourages an attitude of watchfulness. "Therefore keep watch... what I say to you I say to everyone, keep watch." I wonder if you have ever been a night watchman? I have done it once. I was invited to help run a large children's camp in the English lake district. At night the staff had to take their turns to patrol the site. I remember it was a long night, and not a lot happened. There were no wild animals, no intruders, no children trying to escape. So the temptation was to find a cosy place, lie down and go to sleep. It was a big temptation, but I resisted it. In a completely different context, when I worked in the electricity industry, I once did a night shift at the main U.K grid control centre in London. It was the nerve centre of the entire UK grid, and you could watch the energy flows from active power stations along supply lines. It was a reliable system, in those days anyway, and nothing much happened. To my surprise, I

discovered that the engineers on duty did not resist temptation, in fact, they all went to sleep!

You are not to be like this, says Jesus. “Keep watch: because you do not know the time or the hour. Woe to those who, like those engineers or the zealots guarding the city of Jerusalem are asleep when duty calls.

And in the Christian life too, it is very tempting to want to sleep, or at least to want a quiet life and simply not to bother. But that way, says Jesus lies disaster. As is often said, “all that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.” It is hard work constantly engaging with God and engaging with the world. Making sense of our faith in changing times, defending our faith in the public realm – these things demand real effort and it is tempting not to bother. And here at Holy Trinity I am often deeply impressed by the determination with which people do work out their faith in all sorts of contexts. Be like the faithful night watchman says Jesus, alert and attentive, engaged as God’s agent in what is going on around you.

Be hopeful, be alert and finally be strong. It is implied throughout our gospel reading that those who persevere to the end will be saved. It’s more directly expressed in our New Testament reading where St. Paul writes: “As you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ, God will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless.”

Being strong isn’t easy. We can’t do it on our own. That’s why, since its very foundation, Christianity has been a social religion. If we are going to make serious progress in loving God with our heart and mind and strength, we’ll need the fellowship and support of others. God’s usually means of keeping us strong is through the support and encouragement of other Christian people. Elias Llewellyn is just starting out in life. But what we hope for with him is the growth of a faith in God that will keep him strong to the end. And for that he will need the company of Christian brothers and sisters. So that he can come to the end of his life having proved his name to be true: “The Lord is my God”.

So be confident in hope, be watchful and alert, be strong in faith. Advent is for many of us one of the most demanding times of the year. There are family preparations to be made at home, there may be a financial year end to prepare for at work, and maybe on top of that things to do at church. And this year, we do all these things against a horizon laden with political and economic storm clouds, which can affect us directly or indirectly. No wonder that we start to feel the pressure and stress.

Jesus says to all of us: be people of hope, of watchfulness, of strong faith. So may we support and encourage one another in the Christian way, that in our work, our communities our family life, we may bearers of light and hope. Let me close with the words of a prayer for this Advent Sunday

O Lord our God,  
Make us watchful and keep us faithful,  
As we await the coming of your Son our Lord,  
That, when he shall appear;  
He may not find us sleeping in sin,  
But active in his service  
And joyful in his praise,  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.