

Isaiah 7: 10-17
Romans 1: 1-7
Matthew 1: 18-25

This week – perhaps like many of you – I have been rather glued to the news as the awful events in East Aleppo have unfolded.

While things have been unpleasant for a long time, they seemed particularly dismal on Wednesday as people seeking to flee the city were prevented from doing so in a cruel Kafkaesque nightmare made worse by the fact that the planned evacuation ground to a halt amid constant shelling.

The accounts of life in Aleppo, of devastation and of tragic loss, have been truly heart rending – difficult to really comprehend.

While some people have now been evacuated, it doesn't feel like it is the end of the matter at all, either for those who have got out or for the country at large, with the war surely set to continue in the same brutal fashion for some time yet.

In addition to the human cost, what is also striking is the realpolitik – as regional and extra-regional powers weigh in and circle all around.

Russia and Iran and associated rebel groups on one side.

Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the US and their proxies on the other

No one, it seems, is innocent.

All have blood on their hands.

Meanwhile, we are in Advent, preparing to celebrate the birth of the Christ Child...

What conceivably does Advent have to say about Aleppo or indeed other conflicts like it?

Well, actually quite a lot.

But perhaps because of our tendency to domesticate God – to turn God into something God is not – especially at Christmas – we have to search a bit to make the connection clear.

Our reading from Isaiah – the one which the writer of Matthew's gospel sees as foretelling the birth of Christ...

'Look the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall name him Emmanuel'
(Matthew 1: 23)

Our Isaiah reading in fact propels us back into the realpolitik of eighth century BC.

Some things don't change!

Once again, we hear of the manoeuvring of the great powers – not a million miles from present-day Syria.

We don't on this occasion hear about the human cost, as Isaiah offers us a much more elite-eye view but we probably wouldn't be wide off the mark if we assumed the human cost was there.

King Ahaz of Judah – mentioned in our reading – is quaking in his boots as he faces the prospect of an attack from not one but two neighbouring Kingdoms who have ganged up on him to punish him for not joining forces with them to fight a third Kingdom.

It is in this context that the prophet Isaiah is called upon to offer counsel.

God, Isaiah tells us, says to quaking King Ahaz: 'Ask a sign of your God' (verse 11)

But Ahaz feigning devotion ('I will not put my God to the test')...would rather put his trust in man – notably by making an alliance with the King of Assyria – and says he won't ask for a sign.

Isaiah is annoyed with King Ahaz – after all God doesn't give you carte blanche to ask for a sign very often!

'Is it too little', Isaiah says, 'for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also?' (verse 13)

But God, being God, decides to give Ahaz a sign whether he wants it or not.

And that's when we get a child, a son, God with us, Immanuel – and with it the threat from those two Kingdoms will disappear.

Phew! God the deliverer.

And yet there is a twist.

Just as Russia and Iran's support for Syria today will no doubt have consequences for Syria, Ahaz's alliance with Assyria is not without repercussions either...

...With God promising that Ahaz will end up vassal state of the very power he sought help from (i.e. Assyria).

So, it is as if in God's economy with deliverance comes judgement.

So, what do we make of this?

A sign from God with a sting in the tale.

And what about Advent and Aleppo?

Advent and us even?

Advent, one of my favourite religious writers says, pulls the imagination in two directions (Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgement*, 1994).

The first direction is that we turn our minds to the universal longing for God.

The second direction comes with Christmas itself – “the moment of recognition, the moment when what we have always secretly know is set out in plain and fleshly terms” (p. 7)

And yet, rather like God’s sign to King Ahaz, it is not what we think.

‘Who may abide the day of his coming?’ we hear in Malachi (Malachi 3: 2)

Christmas, one writer says – so counter-intuitively, so counter culturally – is a “beauty that is the beginning of terror” (p. 7)

Christmas is the ‘Burning Babe” (p. 7)

Christmas is the “Burning Babe, who has come to cast fire on the earth. Before his presence, idols fall and shatter” (p. 7)

Before his presence, idols fall and shatter!

“Advent is about the essential ambiguity of our religiousness”.

We long for God – to be loved and absolved.

We long for peace, and for the heart-ache and hardship to stop

But our longings are fraught with danger – “the danger of illusion”, the danger of telling ourselves what we want to hear, “of making idols to meet our needs” (p. 9).

In Advent, we relearn the very lesson that the Israelites learnt with the golden calf: “that we cannot make God, however we long for him; that we must be surprised, ambushed and carried off by God if we are to be kept from idols.” (p. 10)

God is not what we expect!

The Christian in Advent needs to listen...”listen to such a degree that Advent becomes both a season of joyful expectancy and a season of poverty – a poverty “where we stand helplessly before the outrages and miseries of our world, utterly at a loss for a word of meaning or hope to speak” (p. 10).

Surely this is Aleppo?

What do we have to say, really, about Aleppo? How do we speak of hope in such circumstances?

And yet, we are here celebrating Advent because a word has been spoken ...an unexpected word... “a word that establishes for good the difference between the God we expect and the God who comes, a word that shows us once for all what an idol looks like in the face of truth” (p. 10)

‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’ (verse 23)

“Advent insists that we stay...a while in the tension of being ‘on the eve’” of Christmas – even as late as the fourth Sunday of Advent – if only “that the new thing we celebrate at Christmas may have a chance of being truly new for us, not a stale and pious cliché” (pp. 10-11).

“If we keep Advent faithfully, we shall know a little of how the word of love” – disclosed again and again in history – in Isaiah’s time, yes even in Aleppo today, in our own lives – “can be freely heard only when we recognise the power of our urge to idolatry” (p. 11).

In the days’ ahead, we will indeed celebrate the birth of the Christ Child, Emmanuel, God with us...

...amongst family and friends, in carol services, and no doubt with much feasting.

All very good!

This is the birth of Jesus who saves us from our sins.

But when Christmas comes and we draw breathe in our own lives.

And as we remember the oppressed people of Syria – and all oppressed people – and the principalities and powers that circle round about...

Let us remember the burning babe before whom all idols shatter and fall.

And let us be changed.

Amen.