



Bristol Cathedral

Cats Might Swim (Romans 13:8-end)

A Sermon preached at the Eucharist, 1st December 2013, by The Dean

Have you ever seen a cat swim? Cats can swim, but they do it without any enthusiasm. I have been trying to find the right word to *describe* a cat swimming. The best I can do is that it is *unconvincing*; it teeters on the brink of disaster. Fish swim with conviction, so do penguins and otters, some people swim quite well, but not cats; it's not their element. It's like my singing. I left the microphone on at evensong once, by mistake during a hymn. I plunged a verger into despair. As Artemus Ward said, 'I am saddest when I sing, so are the people who hear me, they are sadder even than I am'. Singing is not my metier.

The point I am trying to make is that there are moments and places when we can feel dislocated. Not just uncomfortable and ill-at-ease, but floundering: a fish out of water, a cat swimming, a Dean singing. Advent Sunday brings us to that moment and that place. Advent sets the Kingdom before us and asks 'Are you prepared for this?' 'Are you prepared to do this?' The answer is always 'No'. No amount of singing lessons will ever get me to the point where I can leave the microphone on and the verger can hum along. There is no spiritual house-keeping I can do that will fit me for the Kingdom.

This day is challenging. Scripture says so. We have just heard a short passage from Paul's *Letter to the Romans*

The night is far gone, the day is near

So 'What are you going to do?' Paul asks. Paul never asks a question he cannot answer so he has things to say about obeying the authorities, about taxes, commandments and loving one another. It is straightforward and clear, a bit of moral encouragement: 'Get a grip, behave'. And Christians here and everywhere start looking busy and getting ready for God by being good.

Paul, though, never says anything that turns out to be quite that obvious. All of it, the whole splendid argument about how Christians have to behave, depends on a rather startling idea. At the beginning of Chapter 12 Paul tells us that the very first thing we have to understand is that Christian living, all that effort of looking busy rests on a shaky foundation. Do not, he says,

Do not conform yourselves to this present world.

[Romans 12:2]

Being good has nothing to do with what other people think – nothing to do with what society says. What we think we know is a snare and a delusion. Our behaviour needs to be different from anything we might find in the world around us. Now, that is a very important idea and it needs a bit of explaining.

Everything that we know about God has its beginnings in Jesus Christ. That is why St John calls Jesus the 'word', because Jesus is the one who gives us words, the language, to talk about God. But Jesus does not just show us God, so that we can admire him. Jesus shows us ourselves, so we can live. In Jesus we see the life of God *and* we see a human being living that life. That's what makes Christianity so electrifying, it is ourselves we are shown. Jesus is what we might be; he is the one person who has lived human life as it really should be lived. He is the perfect human being.

And what Jesus shows us is that real human life is life *together*. There is an idea abroad that holiness looks a bit like a lonely beach at sunset or hours of silence gazing at an acorn. That is not how Jesus lived. We are not, and we cannot be, fully human by ourselves. In Jesus we see, once and for all, someone who lives perfectly with other humans. It is what he wanted us to see. We see him with his parents, calling disciples, reaching out to the sick and dispossessed, with children, in a crowd and forgiving enemies. Jesus keeps company and does it in a distinctive way. He never imposes or asserts, he never compromises or backs off, and he does not live by taking sides, nor by making clubs. The rest of us live in relationship with *some* people. We are forever making communities of 'us', as opposed to 'them'. British or French, Rovers or City, citizens or terrorists – always identifying the group we belong to and making others alien. Jesus refuses to do that. It is why he talks about Good Samaritans, why he dines with tax collectors and why he touches lepers. He is perfectly human and lives in relationship with all humanity.

And it kills him. Perfect humanity is condemned as subversive. Perfect humanity, a humanity that can live with itself and with God appears amongst us and we kill it. It must be said and understood that by all the tests we normally apply, Jesus fails. In the world as it is, perfect humanity cannot be allowed to live.

In the terrible silence that falls on Good Friday humanity stands condemned – it condemns itself, the hope of all creation founders. Then, the perfect human life rises from the dead. The Kingdom, a new page, actually a new creation, but look at it – it is unpredictable, bewildering and dislocated. It is a life that Mary Magdalene cannot touch but Thomas can. It is a life that is present or absent inexplicably, in a locked room, on the lakeside, at table in Emmaus. It is a life that no disciple can fully comprehend or define.

And that is why Paul says

Do not conform yourselves to this present world.

The way of the world is what kills Christ. What we know, what we are, what we do, those are the things that lead to Calvary: our fears and suspicions; our anxieties and anger; our shame. We really do have to get over the idea that if we just tried a little bit harder it would suddenly be all right.

When you get to the bits of the Bible that talk about the Kingdom actually arriving there is no one saying try harder, do better. What did we hear this morning? We heard Paul:

The night is far gone, the day is near

And his advice was simply that we should wake from sleep. We heard Matthew

About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son

And the advice was stay awake.

Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming

That is the advent gospel. Advent is the season when we think about the Kingdom coming and the advice is never try harder, it is just 'Pay attention'. 'Stay awake'.

Advent sets the Kingdom before us, the place where God reigns, the place of God's justice and God's peace – that is not like anything we know. Do not conform yourselves to this present world. We should be startled this morning. We don't take this step by being a little bit better, we don't live the risen life by trying a bit harder. When C S Lewis described heaven he described a place where the grass was hard to walk on because in the Kingdom reality is fierce and brave. When the poet Edwin Muir talked about the Kingdom he said 'strange I shall hale me to that strange land'.

Being good is a good thing to do. The Dean is not telling you this morning to go home and be rude to your mother. Following Christ really is a summons to love one another. We should do that. On Advent

Sunday though we realise with a sudden jolt, that mere goodness will not carry us over this border. It is not kindness, or giving the Dean your last Rolo that will save and sanctify, but the grace of God. These are the days that beggar the imagination. The advent virtues are not to do with trying to listen to a sermon all the way through or being nice to kittens. The Advent virtues are trust, courage and imagination. Trust in what Christ has done; courage that it might just save even me and imagination that dares to hope for more than we know.

Cast up on that far shore we will flounder. Today though let's trust in God, be brave and imagine. Dare to hope that cats might swim and I might sing with the seraphim. Let's dare to hope for heaven and trust not in ourselves, but in Christ.

Years ago a friend was in Spain. I think it was the festival of the Assumption. After Mass, in the cathedral square, some of the congregation began a dance. It was, he said, joyful and slightly holy. He watched – and then one of the dancers took his hand and drew him into the dance. If it had been me I would have been scarlet with embarrassment (my dancing is not much better than my singing), but with trust, courage and imagination he danced. That's what today is all about – joining the dance. Not because we have learnt the steps, but because we want to and we will trust, be brave and imagine.