

## **Be Still and Know**

‘All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all’ (Isaiah 53:6)

If there’s one piece of music that puts me in the Advent and Christmas spirit more than any other, it’s not Jingle Bells or White Christmas, it’s Handel’s Messiah. Now, I’m sorry if that sounds a bit poncey or highbrow, but somewhere in my twenties my brother gave me a recording of the Messiah for Christmas and I loved it. I played it constantly on my state-of-the-art tape deck in the car at full volume and it is just so joyful and upbeat it’s guaranteed to lift me out of the deepest doldrums and make me feel Christmassy in a way I haven’t really felt since I was a child. And it’s great because it’s suitable for both Advent and Christmas, which is strange because it was originally written as a piece for Holy Week and Easter. Nowadays, however, it is firmly in the Advent and Christmas repertoire.

‘All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all’

These words from the prophet Isaiah in the King James Version form one of the livelier choruses of the Messiah, but they are also perfect for the First Sunday of Advent because they contain in a neat tweet-length sentence the whole meaning of this Sunday. It introduces a new year in the life of the Church during which we once again relive the events of our salvation by accompanying Jesus on his life’s journey. Jesus came among us because we had gone astray like sheep and turned each to his or her own way. The human condition with its tendency to sin has led us away from the one true God into self-indulgence and self-gratification. We were lost to sin and our reliving of the liturgical year celebrates the fact that ‘the Lord has laid on him (Jesus) the iniquity of us all’ and, by taking it to the cross, he has cancelled it out and brought us back into fellowship with God.

This sense of the human condition feeling like being lost and rudderless is well expressed in our first reading today, also from the prophet Isaiah. He has lost sight of God and asks “Why, Lord, leave us to stray from your

ways...Return, for the sake of your servants...Oh, that you would tear the heavens open and come down!” Isaiah expresses something all of us who believe in God feel - a longing and yearning for a closer relationship with God, that somehow, without a sense of God’s presence in our lives we are aimless and without purpose. There is a hunger and thirst for God in the very fibre of our being, an emptiness that only God can fill and we yearn for God to complete us. Famously, as I often quote, St Augustine says of God ‘you have made us for yourself and our hearts cannot find rest until they rest in you’. This restless yearning for God is the theme of Advent when we look forward with longing for God to come intimately close to us in Christ.

Yet God is *never* far from us, but the preoccupations of life, living in the fast lane, the inability to see beyond our own small world means that we miss God who is present to us and reaching out to us in every circumstance of our life. When in the Gospel Jesus tells us to stay awake, what he is saying to us in the context of our lives today is ‘wake up, open your eyes, slow down and look around you, become aware of how God is present in your life, in the people you love, in the beauty of nature, in the words of a song, in the rhythm and measure of a poem, in the touch of a hand or the look in the eye of one you love. Staying awake means slowing down and taking notice.

When you look out of the window of a high speed train everything is a blur, no one thing stands out, nothing has substance or solid existence. This is how we live our lives day by day, always rushing to catch up with ourselves, always chasing our tails. But when you walk or travel on a boat on the river, everything is in slow motion, you have time to savour the fish breaking the water or the moorhen leading her brood. Everything has pace and measure and luxuriates in awareness and presence to everything else. We need to wake up, slow down and take notice of what is going on in our lives from moment to moment, for it is in these moments that God silently communicates Himself to us.

Advent is a wake-up call. We prepare a way for the Lord by being on the lookout for his presence in the ordinary events and circumstances of our lives. St Ignatius of Loyola’s motto was ‘finding God in everything’ and he was able to reflect so deeply on everything that he could even discern the

hand of God in the bad things that happened to him and how, through them, God shaped and guided his life even so. God is not to be found in noise, chaos and distraction, but in the stillness of the heart, in the still small voice of the breeze, the silence of the stars, the song of the birds, the sound of a beetle moving through the grass. This Advent let us resolve to let God come into our lives and welcome Him there by finding small oases of peace and calm in our daily routine. Let us go into our private room and just be with God who is in that intimate place. Let us take time and leisure to appreciate the beauty of the world around us, just to sit and be in the presence of God. As the psalmist writes, “Be still and know that I am God”.