

Sermon 28 November 2010 — Advent 1

Matthew 24:36–44

Has anyone been watching the cricket?

I'm not a cricket fan myself, but I hear the warnings beforehand, the talking up of the English side; and I heard my father's loud enthusiasm on Thursday after all those wickets fell ... then the cheering during successive runs yesterday...

I suppose, going into a game, you always hope; hope you'll play well, or your team will play well — hope you will win! Will we win do you think?

On the first Sunday in Advent, four Sundays before Christmas, we are encouraged to hope, to be alert!

To hope for God's continuing presence in the world; to hope for peace, for joy, for love.

Hope is not a passive thing. Being alert and watchful is not a passive thing.

Hope requires action and being present (like preparing for a cricket match); getting fit, practicing, strategy, knowing your opponents, being watchful and trusting.

Here's an extract from [Light through the Crack: Life after Loss](#), by Sue Mosteller CSJ:

Seeing the bent young woman weeping in the pew, the elderly pastor of an inner city Paris church sat down beside her. When she finally looked up, he asked if there was anything he could do to help.

"Oh no," she mumbled, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. "In a short while I'll be fine."

"Are you hurt? Did something happen to you? what will you do?" the pastor asked with gentle concern.

"A lot has happened, and yes, I've been badly hurt," she answered, wiping her face and looking into his. "Mostly it's my fault, but I won't be suffering much longer." She paused, and then prompted by the compassion in his eyes, continued, "You're a man of God, and I'm a woman of sin! You love people, but after many years on the street, I hate men and I hate myself. You've done good things in your life, and I've done everything bad and mostly failed in mine. I want to die and I'm going to die today by my own hand. I just stopped here for a short word beforehand, even though I doubt that forgiveness is possible for people like me."

After a pause, the old man spoke gently to the young woman. "My dear friend, you have had much suffering and grief. But before you take your life, let me tell you a little secret that you may not have heard. Even though you are a prostitute, you are also a virgin."

The young woman couldn't restrain the snigger that burst from her lips, but she was sobered by the caring seriousness of the old pastor. "Did you know," he went on, "that in each person, deeper than guilt and hatred, is a privileged place in the heart where only love resides? I believe that you are not abandoned, and that God's spirit lives in that

sacred space in your heart. And I'm also convinced that no other human being has access to that holy room, only you and God. In that very blessed place in the depths of your heart, you can never be violated — only loved. There you will always be a virgin. Perhaps if you visit that hidden room right in your own heart right now, you will touch some of the true and unseen beauty of your life!"

I don't know the conclusion to this story, but the Paris paster saw light under the cracked clay of existence.

The pastor reframes the young woman's life. He offers hope beyond the obvious. He gives the young woman the opportunity to choose life again ... to hope ... and maybe this story influences our choices too.

Another extract from 'Light through the Crack: Life after Loss':

In a Buddhist monastery in Asia was a great treasure, a twelve-foot-long clay statue of the Buddha. No-one knows where it came from, but it was valuable because of its raw beauty, age, and size. When plans were made for a new highway to cut through their property, the monks reconstructed their monastery in a nearby field.

Their move almost complete, their treasured Buddha was being lifted high in the air with the help of a hired crane when a large crack began to open in its side. The abbot ordered the crane operator to lower the Buddha onto the open land even though night was falling, and heavy rain was predicted. The monks covered the statue with tarpaulins in an effort to protect it from the water and then retired for the night.

But the abbot could not sleep. He worried about what they would do with the cracked Buddha and whether the heavy rain was causing further damage to their treasured statue. So he went out and with a flashlight and worked his way between the tarpaulins. The statue was dry, but bright rays of reflected light almost blinded him when the beam from his flashlight penetrated the crack in the clay. Something in there was gleaming, and he had no idea what it could be. Deeply perplexed, he decided that all the monks should investigate this mystery together.

Early in the morning he sent the monks in, two by two, to confirm what he had seen. Each pair emerged from the tarpaulins with amazement and puzzlement in their eyes. What was hidden under the clay?

Carefully they unwrapped the statue and standing before it, prayed for guidance. After some deliberation they agreed to break apart the clay to reveal the mystery beneath. As their hammers shattered the clay, a ten-foot-high solid gold statue of the Buddha emerged.

"This is so beautiful," they said to one another. "Just think! It has been here for hundreds of years; many monks lived and died and never knew the secret of the Golden Buddha!" That day the 'Golden Buddha' was moved to its home in the new monastery.

Why was the statue covered with clay? The present-day monks could only guess that long ago their monastery had been threatened by an

invasion, and the monks of old had decided to protect the Golden Buddha by making it look unattractive and less valuable. Perhaps all those monks were annihilated, and when others came to re-establish the monastery, they had no way to know of the clay Buddha's true, hidden beauty.

Time, an unexpected move, light from the crack, and courageous choices caused the real nature of the monks' treasure to be revealed. It is significant to me that the light appears in the most vulnerable place, the crack.

The cracks are where the light shines through. It is often through living our painful, difficult experiences that meaning and hope can emerge.

Parishioner, Bruce Pratt, planned his funeral held at Holy Covenant this past week. He chose the music and the readings. One reading was this anonymous poem:

*If I should die and leave you here awhile
be not like others sore undone,
who keep long vigils by the silent dust and weep.
For my sake turn to life again and smile.
Moving the heart and trembling hand to do something
to comfort weaker hearts than thine,
complete these dear unfinished tasks of mine
and I, perchance, may therein comfort you.*

Anon

It offers hope, a way through grief, through noticing, being present and acting — choosing life, turning to life again.

I challenge you to stay alert to signs of hope in unexpected places, actively **look** for signs of hope, of God's presence in the world... like the place in our hearts where only love resides... like the crack in the clay where the light shines through... like comforting another and seeing a smile... like a green plant growing through cement... like winning the cricket ;—)

Let us prepare for Christmas counter intuitively,

not with presents

but with presence

by being a sign of hope in our chaotic world.

But how do we move to hope?

On page 60 of 'Lost in Wonder', Esther de Waal writes:

Diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease while still in his thirties, Philip Simonov had to learn the art of falling; of falling gracefully. When he came to write his book 'Learning to Fall' (which was published shortly after his death) he said that his illness had also taught him the mastery of falling into every present moment without trying to escape from it. His concern was to be fully present, even when in the midst of pain. He saw how little of this there is in contemporary (American) culture.

The present moment, like the spotted owl or the sea turtle, has become an endangered species. People would rather deal with abstractions than

be awakened out of sleep. With his own impending death before him he thinks about what it means to surrender control, to release the grasping, fearful self in order to enjoy the moment and God's presence within it.

Jean-Pierre de Caussack (?) speaks of 'the sacrament of the present moment', and Simon Weil says 'absolute attention is prayer'.

Perhaps we prepare for Christmas by being present today — being here, being open and attentive wherever we are, whatever we are doing.

Bishop John Taylor (?) writes (p 71 'Lost in Wonder'):

Over the swinging parapet of my arm your sentinel eyes lean gazing.
Hugely alert in the pale unfinished clay of your infant face. They drink,
light from this candle on the tree. Drinking, not pondering, each bright
thing you see, you make it yours without analysis and, stepping down
the aperture of thought to a fine pinhole, you are filled with flame.
Give me for Christmas, then, your kind of seeing, not studying candles
— angel, manger, star — but staring as at a portrait, God's I guess, that
shocks and holds the eye, till all my being, gathered, intent and still, as
now you are, breathes out its wonder in a wordless 'yes'.

As Isaiah says, 'Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.'