

Sermon – Sunday 3rd December 2017 – 10 am

I am a very big fan of romantic comedies, so was particularly pleased when about a year ago someone gave me a copy of a film I hadn't seen called About Time. The plot of the film is, to be honest, a little far-fetched. The main character, Tim, finds out from his father at 21 that all the men in the family have the ability to travel back in time. They can't change history, but they can re-live events in their own lives differently.

Well, as you can imagine with a young man at the age of 21, the main focus is on finding love, and so there are wonderful scenes in which he makes his fumbling mistakes, only to re-live the moments, finding the perfect lines and appearing suave and sophisticated.

I'm sure the plot doesn't stand up to scrutiny, but what Tim discovers is that actually the advantages of being able to travel back in time are pretty limited. In particular, travelling back beyond significant events – such as the birth of a child – changes everything, so that a different child is born. As I say, not an air-tight plot, but the point being made is an important one. That actually we are all limited in our ability to control what happens. Even someone who can travel in time cannot shield himself or those he loves from the problems – and indeed the tragedies – of ordinary life.

Before Tim's father dies, he tells Tim how he has made use of the gift of time travel. "So he told me his secret formula for happiness. Part one of the two part plan is that I should just get on with ordinary life, living it day by day like anyone else. But then came part two of dad's plan. He told me to live every day again, almost exactly the same; the first time with all the tensions and worries that stop us from noticing how sweet the world can be, but the second time noticing."

And yet by the end, Tim has gone one step further. "The truth is I now don't travel back at all, not even for the day. I just try to live every day as if I've deliberately come back to this one day. To enjoy it as if it was the full final day of my extraordinary, ordinary life."

So what on earth has all of this got to do with Advent? And in particular with the apocalyptic Gospel reading that we have heard?

One of the peculiarities of this morning's Gospel reading is the way in which it seeks to hold together the idea that the second coming – whatever we mean by that – may be soon, together with the reality that we have no idea when it will be. And that, I think, is one of the important aspects of Advent, this time of waiting and preparation.

On one level the answer to what we're waiting for is obvious. We are waiting to celebrate and remember the birth of Jesus, when God became human. And the incarnation allows us to really believe that God knows and understands the challenges of being human – knows what it is like to be us.

But have you noticed how easy it is to move from the delight in knowing that God understands us in all our humanity to somehow wanting to make God in our own image – to begin to think that God must surely think the same way as us, see the world as we do.

And that, I think, is why the season of Advent must also include these challenging readings which remind us that God is over and above and beyond our understanding. Not to take anything away

from the knowledge that we are fully known and fully loved by God. But to help us to remember, too, that we don't fully know and fully understand God.

So this time of watching, waiting and preparing is actually a time to be attentive to God. And there is no way to be attentive to God without being attentive to the world around us – and people around us.

One of the things that I have valued about my first few weeks here at St. Mary's is the realisation that we experience and live out our faith in so many different ways. There are those who are practically-minded, maintaining this wonderful place of worship faithfully and attentively; those who gather each morning to pray for the people of the parish; those who visit the sick or go shopping for those who can't get out; those who meet together to discuss their faith in small groups. I could go on – and of course no-one sits simply in one category, we all have more to us than that.

But I wonder whether during Advent it might be worth taking time to notice one another. To value the different ways in which we witness to our faith. Not, I should add, to make value judgements or to try to find ways in which we – or others – are lacking. But rather simply to value and appreciate the depth and variety around us. To realise that this diversity shows us a little more about God than we can discover for ourselves.

And it is this attentiveness that brings me back to the film I mentioned at the start. The way in which Tim decided to live – enjoying each day as if it was the full final day of his extraordinary, ordinary life – is perhaps something worth practising during Advent, this time of waiting and preparation. There is something about our faith which must somehow change us, make the way we live different, distinguishable from people without faith. And perhaps this attentiveness is part of that difference.

It is an attentiveness that is spoken of in apocalyptic terms in the Gospel reading – the need to be aware and awake, because we do not know what the future holds or indeed when big things will happen. But it is not only because we don't know what the future holds that we are called to attentiveness. It is also a core aspect of our faith. It is the only way in which we can come to know God. Time spent in God's presence – whether in quiet prayer, walking the dog, doing exercise, whatever it is that works for you. Time spent in other people's presence, seeking to understand how they reflect God's image and God's glory. Time spent noticing the world around us.

None of these things, as we know only too well, shields us from the pain that life can bring, from the challenges that come our way. But if we practise this kind of attentiveness this Advent, perhaps when it comes to Christmas day we will genuinely appreciate it as if for the first time.

Amen