

## FEAR NOT, LITTLE FLOCK

### Sermon at the Eucharist on the Second Sunday in Advent

Readings: Isaiah 11. 1-10; Romans 15. 4-13; Matthew 3. 1-12

THE Dark Ages were in the news this week. ‘Less than half the United Kingdom is Christian for the first time since the Dark Ages’ screamed one newspaper headline. No matter that the Dark Ages are a term no respectable historian would dream of using. No matter that whenever the Dark Ages are supposed to have happened, religious statistics for the period are conveniently unavailable. No matter that there are two and a half billion Christians throughout the world today. No matter: Christmas is coming, carols are heard in the streets, and therefore it’s the season for sections of the press to remind us that Christianity, at least in this country, is on the way out. The news behind the screaming headlines of course was the release of the latest census figures, telling us that the 27 and a half million people in the United Kingdom who identify as Christian are now less than half the population.

This is not going to be a lecture on church decline or church growth, and if it were, there are more qualified people than I to give it. It is a sermon for the season of Advent, the season of hope (as we were reminded last week). It is a sermon that will (as sermons should) refer to the readings of the day. But yes, it is a sermon on what it means to be a Christian in a society such as ours, when the headlines scream to us that our religion and our church are in sharp decline.

So let us start there, with the headlines. The number of those who identify as Christian is declining. The number of those attending church is declining. The number of clergy is declining. The ability of local congregations to meet the cost of their church building and the cost of their priest (even if they have a priest) is declining. That is the dominant story (or narrative, as I would have to say if this were a serious lecture).

There are plenty of statistics to support this story, and the recent census is one of them. But it’s not the only story. There’s also a story of how those who identify with no religion may still believe in God, or admit to praying, or respond to the idea of spirituality. There’s also a story of the extraordinary resilience of small congregations to look after and to adapt their village churches for a variety of community uses, which is not a new idea but a very old one. There’s also a story of what it means to be a Christian in a society in which the consistent story *all our lives* has been one of decline,

and yet we are still here. When I was thinking of ordination, half a century ago, my college chaplain earnestly advised me to have a second career up my sleeve, as in the course of my working life the point would come when there would be no money left to pay the clergy. While I never discovered anything else that I might have been good at, I'm glad to say that I'm still paid a stipend, and I'm even soon to draw a modest pension. So alongside the story of decline, there's also a story of resilience and survival against the odds.

Every time a news item about the Church appears on TV, it is accompanied by a picture of a large church and a small congregation. The implication is that every church *ought* to be full for every service; and that once upon a time, it was so. But this is not true. This cathedral was not built as big as it is to seat a congregation of a thousand people every Sunday or every day. It is this big so that the monks could have very long processions up and down the aisles, which they enjoyed very much. We do not have churches on every street corner in cities like Worcester because once upon a time they were all full. All the evidence is that they weren't. The Victorians consistently overbuilt. So beware those depressing pictures of empty churches: they tell more than one story.

Now when we turn to the scriptures, we find very little interest in numerical growth or numerical decline. In this morning's first reading, the prophet Isaiah is looking forward to a time when (as he says) 'the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea'. It's a wonderful picture, a hopeful picture, and it's written at a time when the people of Israel faced the terrible prospect – or actual reality – of occupation by a foreign power; and every effort would be made to stamp out the worship of the God of Israel once and for all. The prophet's message is simply that God is greater than present circumstances. In the Letter to the Romans, Paul picks up this prophetic hope of the coming kingdom of God, the day when 'the root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope'. But he's writing to the small and anxious Christian congregation at Rome, threatened by the might of the Roman empire. And the same threat is there in the background of the gospel reading this morning. John the Baptist announces that the promised kingdom is near, prompting the question, what sort of kingdom? And how does it relate to the might of the Roman empire? And how could that kingdom possibly survive the martyrdom of John the Baptist and the crucifixion of Jesus? The background to all three readings this morning is that of a small and embattled minority, putting their hope in God against all the odds of present circumstances.

Now this is not to underestimate the efforts made by diocesan authorities to match the church's slender resources to a more effective management of its buildings and a more effective mission in the world. But it is to suggest that our aim as a church should not be to get back to some imagined past when the church was more 'successful'. It is to suggest, strongly, that the scriptures have no concept whatever of a 'successful' church. It is to suggest that the scriptures bear witness to a church which is *essentially* (in this world) small, threatened, and on the verge of being overwhelmed, whose only hope is a God who asks for faithfulness and perseverance more than he asks for strategic effectiveness and success. 'Fear not, little flock', says Jesus, 'for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom'. Those shockingly un-strategic words are the only occasion that I can find in the gospels when Jesus even noticed the size of the church. Oh, and that other occasion, when we are told that 'many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him'. And on that occasion Jesus said to the twelve, 'Will you also go away?' to which Peter replied, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. And we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God'.

The headlines may scream that 'less than half the United Kingdom is Christian for the first time since the Dark Ages'. In the light of the scriptures, let me suggest some other headlines – not that any newspaper editor will use them. What about this one? 'Jesus Christ has been worshipped in Worcester every day since long before the Dark Ages were heard of'. Or this one? 'The birth of Jesus Christ is still the biggest festival in the year even for those who do not call themselves Christians'. Or this one? 'Only a minority of people worship in Worcester Cathedral on a Sunday, but it's still the place that holds the spiritual aspirations of the whole community'. Or this one? 'Two thousand years on, people all over the world still find that Jesus Christ has the words of eternal life. They believe, and have come to know, that he is the Holy One of God'.

Tomorrow evening, at our second Advent address, some of us will reflect on the extraordinary life of St Charles de Foucauld, the hermit of the Sahara. Without anticipating too much of what I shall say then, I can say that we shall examine the story of one whose outward life was in almost every respect a failure. Yet it is a story which, in the century since his brutal and pointless death in the desert, has inspired thousands of people to lives of sacrificial service to others. That is the sort of statistic no newspaper can ever capture. They are the statistics, not of this world, but of the kingdom of God. 'Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.'

**PETER ATKINSON**  
*Dean of Worcester*

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