

...follow don't wallow...

A four week Advent course by Hayley Matthews based on the Advent daily readings in The Bishop of Leeds', Nick Baines, book *Freedom is Coming*.

Week One

'to be exiled is to find a world has ended – that the new world involves total dislocation' (p14, *Freedom is Coming*, Baines).

Advent marks the beginning of the Christian year, and that means that an end has come. This year the ending of our year seems all the more poignant for many of us have had to say goodbye to loved ones whom COVID took unexpectedly, and to a way of life we thought was ours for the taking. Ordinary, everyday movement was forbidden; touch has been banned; work is now a luxury afforded to the few and often carried out in isolation, at home. For many of us, this new state of exile is completely alien and we have spent many months looking forward to 'getting back to normal', to being with our friends, family and colleagues again, to regaining our unlimited freedom.

As the year progressed, our language changed and we began to talk about 'the new normal' until it became clear that the new normality really wasn't going to be normal at all. It seems timely that we are entering into the full acknowledgement of a world ending just as our religious observance reminds us that God's pilgrim people have always and ever will be, exiles in this world. We are being forced – many for the first time in their lifetime – into exile, into a complete dislocation from everything we had known and taken for granted before the pandemic began.

As we finish the month of prayer our Archbishops' called us to at the beginning of November's lockdown, I wonder what we have been praying for? Have we been repenting of our desire for security and a return to the home comforts we love and miss? Have we given gratitude for all those many and varied aspects of our former lives we so took for granted? Have we been praying for the future to look pretty much like it did in the past? Have we been waiting, silent, open to God's voice, God's visions? Are we expectantly waiting for a move of God's Spirit to nudge us in the right direction or passively waiting for somebody else, somewhere else, to make things right again?

These are all big questions, huge, in fact, but ones that need asking as we enter into Advent as exiles, relinquishing all that we thought we knew that we might fully experience our present dislocation. For only when we truly align ourselves with God's exiled, pilgrim people can we hear Isaiah's words of comfort for what they are; and only when we have received that comfort for ourselves can we too 'comfort, O comfort' all God's people amongst whom we have been sent. For this is no easy panacea, the comfort of a hot chocolate in a café at the end of a long wet, walk. No, this is the comfort of the hard graft required to plan where and how a building might be relinquished/rebuilt/shared while it yet rains; to gather the resources, hire the hands and develop plans for the future; whom will it shelter, when will we get them there, and how shall we comfort them when we do?

Reflection and discussion

1. What has been the most disconcerting part of the pandemic for you?
2. What have you found most difficult to let go of – or do you still need to let go of it?
3. Who do you think feels most dislocated by what we've experienced this year?
4. How might we think about our Church buildings differently in light of our present dislocation?
5. What do you think God might be calling us to in the future?

Prayer

Loving God,
Forgive us for forgetting that we are a pilgrim people
Forever exiled in a world that does not know You.
Help us to resist the temptation to hold tightly to that which secures us to a past
From which You are leading us, and teach us to trust You anew
As you make all things new
through Jesus Christ our Lord
Amen.