Big Days

Next year I have a big birthday – my biggest so far. How will I celebrate it? I’m tempted to make no plans, and see what happens. Will anyone who knows me well notice, and arrange some secret celebration that I happen to stumble into? My family have started to ask questions. “What are you doing for your big birthday? You’ll need to get a move on before it’s too late”. I’m fighting my inner procrastinator. I’m realising that I must wake up to my big day, as it casts its shadows across today and tomorrow - shadows that are calling me to do something, or else I’ll miss it.

Big days are the theme of today’s readings. Isaiah the prophet writes of Jerusalem’s “big day”, when people will stream to the city from all over the world to learn how to beat swords into ploughshares (Isaiah 2.1-5). Paul the apostle writes of a “day [that] is near”, that Christians in Rome need to wake up to (Romans 13.11-end). Jesus speaks of a day that will come “like a thief in the night” and take sleepy people by surprise (Matthew 24.36-44). Big days are coming soon.

Today is a big day for Fiona, as she’s welcomed into her new ministry here. And for those who are being admitted to Holy Communion. Their big day hasn’t arrived like a thief in the night, because they’ve been preparing for it. For them – and for all of us – it’s a special day, as the community that gathers around the Lord’s table is extended and enriched.

The big days that Isaiah and St Paul and Jesus speak of are particularly special. They’re not just a 24-hour kind of a day, a date in the calendar for individuals or families or churches, but days that reveal something about God. These biblical days speak of the God who comes from the future. What does that mean?

Today’s readings associate God with time: “the day of the Lord’s coming is near”. Time is moving inexorably towards the dawning of God’s big day. “The day” is full of warning, surprise, hope, because God is coming with salvation or judgement, or both.

Saying that God is coming is meant to shape the way we live now, as the shadows of God’s big day fall across today and tomorrow. That’s why we have Advent, a penitential season that we use to help us to focus on the coming of Jesus. I’m sure you’ll have noticed that our Advent is very different from the secular version. I had an early whiff of this one back in August when I received an email from Boots, telling me about their range of Advent calendars – more than 50 this year. I searched in vain for anything about Mary and Joseph,
the child Jesus, shepherds, angels, the star and wise men. I didn't realise there were so many varieties of smellies and cosmetics. But no mention of Bethlehem and birth, and certainly not God.

    The secular Advent is now an extension of the midwinter spend-fest we call Christmas. Whereas the church’s Advent is a protest against the way penitence is squeezed out of preparation, and replaced by increasingly frantic frenzy. We take our time to reach Bethlehem, and we light candles to remind us of those who accompany us.

    We begin our journey this morning over a thousand years before the birth of Jesus, with Abraham and Sarah. It occurred to me as I was preparing this that they were economic migrants. They left their home in today’s Iran as part of a great movement of people who were searching for a better life in the west, in Canaan and Egypt, where there were richer pastures for their flocks. Their story in Genesis sees them leaving home in response to the coming of God, God’s call. I wonder what difference it makes to the start of our Advent to travel with economic migrants, to light a candle for them, to pray for God’s blessing as we make our journey with them.

    The point of Advent is to imagine ourselves on the journey that God makes towards the big day of the birth of Jesus. With migrants like Abraham and Sarah for company, with prophets like Isaiah, whose vision of swords into ploughshares calls the world – beginning with Jerusalem – to resolve its problems without resorting to the destructive wastefulness of war. And in a fortnight’s time with another prophet, John the Baptist, who called God’s people to come back to the wilderness, where their story began. And then with a poor couple like Mary and Joseph.

    Who do they remind us of in our world, these visionaries, these people who are pushed around by big politics and changing economies and what people think of them? We light candles for them all throughout Advent, to show that we associate the light of God’s coming with migrants and prophets and poor families, people who long for the world to be a better place.

    How easy it is, though, to leave out a vital part of the story of God’s Advent. The men’s football World Cup has been 12 years in the planning, and now it has finally come to Qatar. The beautiful game has a universal reach. But when we see what’s been happening around the football, we might wonder whether its big day reminds us of salvation or judgement - or perhaps both?
The Cop 27 Conference on climate change hasn’t taken as long to plan. Its big day in Sharm El-Sheikh brought leaders together from all over the world, and raised hopes about being able to mollify an increasingly destructive climate. But has the coming of Cop27 brought the world closer to salvation or judgement - or perhaps both?

Big days cast their shadows over today and tomorrow, and their coming is nothing if not challenging. It seems that wherever there is the possibility of salvation, there is also judgement.

That’s even true of our big day here, as we extend our welcome to Holy Communion. This big day makes our gathering around the altar look more like the inclusive fellowship meals that began with Jesus, when he scandalised the upright and respectable people of his day by eating with all kinds of people, including women and children. But as the cost of living crisis begins to bite, and food banks become more stretched, I wonder how much this eucharistic big day, with its vision of God’s generous hospitality, is a sign of salvation or judgement - or perhaps both.

Our faith in the God who comes shapes the way we live, as the shadows of God’s big day fall across today and tomorrow. Advent calls us to take time to reflect on the astonishing scope of salvation that God brings in the coming of Jesus. And to pray that we might not be caught out, like the sleepy victims of the thief in the night, by the judgement that comes with it.

Now is the time to wake up - God’s big day is coming.