

# St Edmundsbury Cathedral



The First Sunday of Advent  
Sunday 3 December 2023

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by the Right Reverend Tim Stevens, Honorary Bishop

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*"The stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken."*

Mark:13 v25

It was an electrifying moment – I was in the great national Cathedral in Washington DC just 6 weeks ago as the choir, standing in the nave, began to sing one of the most moving of African American spirituals. Out of the silence and the darkness came the haunting sounds of the opening line: *"My Lord, what a morning, My Lord what a morning, My Lord what a morning when the stars begin to fall."*

This is music born out of the deep sufferings of slavery. It gradually filled that vast neo-gothic space where Martin Luther King had preached shortly before his assassination and as a procession of African American pastors and leaders from all over the USA moved to their places. We were marking the African American caucus weekend in the US capital and dedicating two new windows to celebrate the US civil rights movement.

*"My Lord what a morning"* evokes images of the plantations of the southern USA, and like so many spirituals, was conceived in despair but was shot through with hope. Hope that even in the darkest hours, God's justice and peace would break in to the hellish conditions which human beings seem repeatedly to create for one another. The song echoes many of the apocalyptic images we've just heard read from St Mark's Gospel: *"the stars will be falling from heaven and the powers in the heavens will be shaken..."* Jesus seems to be predicting a time of imminent catastrophe when all that the people of Israel had hoped for would collapse – yet that would be the moment of God's dramatic appearance and intervention in human history.

*"My Lord what a morning"* It's not that hard for us today to hear the despair of the slaves who wrote those words and to identify with those whose lives today are an unrelenting experience of pain and anxiety. The news daily reminds us of the desperation of people living under leaders on both sides in the middle east who seem determined to pursue the heresy that slaughter can lead to peace. At a panel discussion in Cambridge last month, Muslim, Jewish leaders spoke of the fears now gripping many of their communities in this country as the killing in Israel and Gaza continues unabated.

*"My Lord what a morning"* we might be tempted to cry with that same despair as we hear King Charles' speech to the Cop 28 climate summit when he said: *"We are carrying out a vast, frightening experiment of changing every ecological condition, all at once, at a pace that far outstrips nature's ability to cope...our choice is now a starker, and darker one: how dangerous are we actually prepared to make our world?"*

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*“My Lord what a morning”* feels like a cry of desperation as the Covid inquiry reveals yet another episode of confusion and backbiting at the heart of government. And so on and on. The Advent season begins this year with causes of despair all around us even here in a relatively comfortable and strife free town where our familiar rights and liberties are not yet under threat. We surely know in this Advent season more than ever before what Isaiah is talking about when he cries to God: *“You have hidden your face from us and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.”*

But wait, the cry does not end there. Immediately comes the word on which the whole Advent hope is built and on which the journey we now make towards Christmas depends. *“YET”* says the prophet. *“Yet O Lord, you are our father, we are the clay, and you are our potter....”* Even when all the evidence and data points to the contrary, God is still our father. Even when all our experiences of suffering threaten to overwhelm us, God is our father. Even when our own shame and remorse makes us feel like giving up on hope, God is our father. And even when the pointlessness of trying to make a difference persuades us to leave it all to others, God is still our father and always will be the most faithful, the most loving, the most merciful father it is possible to imagine.

If those words are true, it makes sense to be here. If those words are true, even in the midst of our seeming powerlessness against all the forces of evil, we too can sing *“My Lord what a morning.”* If those words are true, we can celebrate with Loui and his family as he comes to be baptised and to declare in front of us all that he turns to Christ, because even when life seems to be going wrong he is prepared to live by risking everything on the truth that God is his father.

And if those words are true all of you guys who are about to be admitted to Communion are saying something really powerful to the rest of us, and to your friends and families and to the whole world. When we come to Communion we are discovering over and over again that we profoundly belong to one another. That I am one with you and you are one with each other and with God. That God doesn't see us as we come to the altar as Deans or Bishops or canons or male or female or rich or poor or black or white or even Christian or Muslim. God sees us as his vulnerable children. He sees us as a father sees us holding out our empty hands. He sees our need of him and of each other and he longs to respond to us. You are joining God's worldwide family in the great witness to God's presence at the heart of all our lives.

And so you are today being welcomed into the community which believes and trusts in that truth above all others. The community which comes over and over again to the table where God invites us because this is where we learn the paths of peace. This is where we realise that of course there can be no such thing as redemptive violence between human beings. This is where the Advent Hope takes root. This is the feast to which we're invited now.

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My Lord what a morning it is this morning! In this place and at this moment the heavens are torn open and the stars begin to fall because this is the place and the moment in which God appears to us. The Advent season invites us to pay attention to that extraordinary truth even though for so much of our lives we've failed to notice. This is where hope begins to take root in our hearts. Even so come Lord Jesus.