**Sermon preached by Dr Clare Amos at St Anne’s Cathedral, Belfast on Advent Sunday 2015**

Quite a long time ago, in the early years of my marriage, I lived in Beirut, Lebanon, where my husband Alan was the chaplain to the Anglican community in both Lebanon and Syria. It was during the years of the Lebanese civil war so it was, shall we say, an ‘interesting’ experience. During intervals of comparative peace Lebanon was both a stunningly beautiful and totally fascinating country in which it was a privilege to live and to explore. But those times of relative peace were regularly punctuated by episodes of savage intercommunal fighting, in which intensive shelling between the two sides of the city of Beirut, the so-called Christian East, and the West where we and many other expatriates lived, forced normal life to come to a temporary halt. This blitz of gunfire was often worse at night. While it was going on sleep was impossible, and we, like many others, took refuge in the comparative safety of internal corridors to sit it out until the shells stopped falling or morning came.

One of the ways my husband and I used to try and distract ourselves during those sleepless nights was to guess what the headlines of the newspaper would be the next morning. We read the French language paper, L’Orient- Le Jour. Strangely, however bad the fighting was overnight, L’Orient-Le Jour almost always managed to go to press – I think I can only recall it missing one day during all the years we lived there. But it also went in for some spectacular headlines to describe the situation – though as things got worse it did begin to run out of negative superlatives. There are a couple of headlines which Alan and I recall to this day: Nuit d’enfer… which translates as ‘Night of hell’ was one. But one morning after a particularly dramatic and noisy night – one simple stark word was enough, that I don’t even have to translate into English. The headline in L’Orient –Le Jour that day just shrieked ‘Apocalypse’.

When each Advent Sunday we read for our Gospel a passage from the apocalyptic section of the Gospel I remember my own so-called apocalyptic experience in Beirut those years ago. Because for better or worse the lectionary that we, and many other Christians use in our worship, chooses each year to mark the beginning of Advent, by reading the strange and seemingly frightening apocalyptic section of whichever Gospel will be the main focus of the lectionary for the coming year. Apocalyptic is a kind of biblical writing in which themes like cosmic confusion and fear and judgement are prominent. And because during next year our lectionary will be concentrating on the Gospel of Luke, today it is part of Luke’s apocalyptic reflection in chapter 21 which we have been listening to. Why do we begin the church’s new year – for that is what Advent Sunday is – with such a focus on the end? Why do we have to hear about stars falling from heaven: why cannot we simply read about the friendly star that kindly stood over the manger to point the way for the wise men?

Perhaps it is important first to all to unravel the word ‘apocalyptic’ which has gained a bit of a bad press over the years, partly due to the abuse of it by a number of Christians who seem to have forgotten Jesus’ final admonition to his disciples NOT to search for ‘times and seasons’. Too often too many of our Christian brothers and sisters want to use the apocalyptic parts of our scripture to do precisely that. Fundamentally however apocalyptic is not, or not just, a synonym for the kind of horrors that Beirut went through, or indeed some of the horrors that we have been experiencing in Europe and the Middle East over the past weeks and months. At their heart the apocalyptic parts of our scriptures are intended to be expressions of hope, of the assurance that ‘In the end, God’, that against all apparent appearances history and the cosmos are held in God’s hands and in God’s love. They are words written above all with the suffering people of God in mind: the promise that, as our reading from Luke’s Gospel puts it, ‘your redemption is drawing near.’

But the language of apocalyptic also offers us something more: a vital reminder that our Christian faith is not just a private or individual affair. Our beliefs and actions can and do have consequences in the social realm, and even at the global dimension. We are not allowed the luxury of believing that the birth of Christ is simply a pretty tale to be celebrated in children’s nativity plays, for the cosmic language of apocalyptic insists that it can and should make a difference to our nations and our world. There is a profound interconnectedness of all things: expressed in part by the frequent use in apocalyptic of the idiom of the world groaning in travail with the birth-pangs of the new creation. Mary’s birth-pangs, Mary’s labour and that of our world impinge upon each other.

I mentioned that each Advent Sunday we read from the apocalyptic chapter of one of the three synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark or Luke. Though at first sight they may look the same in fact there are small, subtle but significant differences between the Gospels. In particular Luke has some expressions which mark it out from the other two. There is for example that comment about the drawing near of our redemption which only appears in Luke. There is also a note two sentences earlier about the nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves which again is peculiar to Luke. It reminds me – and I think it is supposed to – of Paul’s adventures on his sea-voyage to Rome and his shipwreck due to rough seas on the island of Malta. It is no accident that it is Luke himself, in Acts, his sequel to his Gospel, who tells us about this roaring of the seas that Paul himself experienced. It is through little clues like this that we can be let in to the perspective of the evangelist, the gospel writer himself. And Luke’s perspective is particularly interesting, and perhaps especially important for Christians today as we seek to contribute a Christian perspective into the convoluted international panorama of our time. Luke’s Gospel I believe was compiled in its present form in the years after the catastrophic war of 70 AD between the Jews and the Romans which resulted in the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the apparent ending of Jewish national hopes. Earlier Christian apocalyptic understanding, such as we find in the Gospel of Mark which either predates or is contemporary with the Jewish Roman war, seems to have expected such dramatic events to usher in the end of time: Luke however has lived through those dread days and come out the other side, to find that time as we know it still continues. He has perhaps come to understand that the language of apocalyptic may be a way of speaking with great seriousness about the need for his contemporaries to engage with the political realities of his day, to engage constructively with but also to challenge the Roman Empire, to ask searching questions about peace on earth and peace in heaven. In some ways we might even suggest that the Book of Acts, particularly the part of it in which Paul is the main character is an exploration of what it means to be a follower of Christ in the political world of mighty empires: there is a glorious ambiguity in Acts about whether or not the early Christians were guilty – or not – of turning the world upside down. And is the redemption which draws near and of which today’s Gospel reading speaks from – or through – the empire of Rome? These apocalyptic threads do not offer us easy answers, but they do, I believe, force us to address the question that Archbishop Rowan Williams once briefly, yet eloquently posited when he noted that, ‘The political realm is a place of spiritual decision, a place where souls are made and lost.’ It is good to be reminded of this at the present time when undoubtedly there will be significant but incredibly difficult political decisions to be made both nationally and internationally over the coming months and years.

But it is not just the overtly political realm that the language of apocalyptic can speak to us. This weekend, as I am sure you know, the international climate change summit begins in Paris. After this Eucharist there will be both prayers and a rally taking place in this vicinity in which people will be sharing their anxiety about the needs of creation and expressing their commitment to work for the world’s wellbeing. Increasingly we are becoming aware that this global concern too cannot be separated from spiritual decision. Do we really believe that love and self-sacrifice are written into the fabric of the universe? Because that is what, I believe, is necessary if as Christians and as human beings we are going to make a real difference to the story of climate change. The language of seas roaring and earth shifting – characteristic of apocalyptic – somehow constitutes a vital resource that can help us take this concern with appropriate seriousness. And trees too, which feature twice in today’s scripture readings. We heard Jeremiah speaking of a branch, and Jesus in Luke’s Gospel talking about the flourishing of a fig tree. In both cases the tree is a biblical metaphor for hope and possibility in spite of unpropitious present circumstances. There is hope for a tree. The cutting down of trees, as in the world’s rainforests, has become a marker for human despoilment of our world, conversely the planting of trees acts as a sign of human commitment for the future. Do you know the tale from the Talmud? A rabbi was walking down a road when he saw a man planting a tree. The rabbi asked him, ‘How many years will it take for this tree to bear fruit? The man answered that it would take seventy years. The rabbi asked, ‘Are you so fit and strong that you expect to live that long and eat of its fruit?’ The man answered, ‘I found a fruitful world because my forefathers planted for me. So I will do the same for my children.’

On Advent Sunday we are called to wake, and wait, and watch, and wonder that the baby so shortly to come to us is not simply part of our world’s past but also of its future. We are called to make ready his way, but will his way find us ready? Will we find within the rhythms of nature at this time of the year, with its dying and hope of new life, and its radiant but sometimes hidden beauty, God's word to us? I close with the poem ‘Advent Calendar’.

**Advent Calendar**
He will come like last leaf's fall.
One night when the November wind
has flayed the trees to the bone, and earth
wakes choking on the mould,
the soft shroud's folding.

He will come like frost.
One morning when the shrinking earth
opens on mist, to find itself
arrested in the net
of alien, sword-set beauty.

He will come like dark.
One evening when the bursting red
December sun draws up the sheet
and penny-masks its eye to yield
the star-snowed fields of sky.

He will come, will come,
will come like crying in the night,
like blood, like breaking,
as the earth writhes to toss him free.
He will come like child. *(Poem, © Rowan Williams)*