

St Mary's Church, Dorchester, Sunday 30th November, i.e. First Sunday of Advent.

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:11-end

Matthew 24:36-44

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Every Friday the Pilsdon Community in West Dorset prepares for guests. Bedding is laid out in the guest rooms; extra places are set in the dining room. But the guests, when they come – if they come – are always unexpected. That's because the guests who arrive at Pilsdon on Fridays are wayfarers: men of the road, many of them homeless, but some of them just badly housed and in need of respite. Without any announcement, at any point of the day or night, they arrive on foot, or on their bikes, or sometimes by taxi. The deal is that if you arrive on Friday you can stay until Monday morning – or Tuesday if it's a bank holiday weekend.

As you might expect, guests coming to Pilsdon bring with them unexpected challenges. Some wayfarers struggle to stay away from drink or drugs for the weekend; they get a lift into Bridport. You might find that a particular wayfarer does or says things that aggravate one of the members of the regular community; all it takes is the wrong word, or a wrong look, and people who might otherwise be on top of their emotions get sent into a spiral. On recognising a particular wayfarer, you can sometimes predict which of the community will go into hiding for the weekend.

That's the negative side of the guest ministry at Pilsdon; but there are positives too. If wayfarers are often provocative characters that can work for good. Projects that had lingered for months can be completed in a flurry of unexpected interest and skill when just the right combination of characters visit for the weekend. By the late summer members of the community have become sick of fruit picking at just the moment when the garden is bursting with produce. What you need – and what you so often receive – is a sudden influx of wayfarers eager to show how willing they are to work for their dinner; and the community suddenly has more blackcurrants than it knows what to do with. Sometimes the gift a wayfarer brings is their story, or their need.

I thought of Pilsdon, and its rhythm of weekly arrivals and departures, when I was reading the Gospel set for this morning. Jesus teaches his disciples to expect the unexpected: this strange figure he calls “the Son of Man”, who arrives like a thief (or a wayfarer) [Matthew 24:43-44]. And again, I thought of Pilsdon when I read the passage we heard from Isaiah. In the prophet's vision gravity

seems to have been turned on its head; and a strange river of people from every nation is flowing uphill towards the mountain of God, towards the Source of instruction [Isaiah 2:2-3]. In both of these Bible readings, it seems to me, we have people moving in unexpected ways, bringing with them unexpected challenges and gifts.

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If you've spent much time around me recently you may have heard me talking about freedom. I've been reading a book by Timothy Snyder, a historian who has spent a lot of time studying authoritarian regimes, and studying the people who frustrate them. Snyder realised at some point in the last couple of years that he has been writing a lot of negative stuff – writing about the things societies need to avoid. In the book I've just been reading he sets himself the positive task of describing what freedom looks like: not just the things to avoid, but the things to seek, the virtues to cultivate.

He says that there are five things that are essential to freedom. Don't worry – I'm not going to list them all! One of the five is what he calls “unpredictability”. That's more or less what it sounds like: free people make unexpected connections, they come up with unexpected solutions to problems. Authoritarians like to limit people's choices; when they succeed, they make people think they have exercised free choice when actually they are just following a formula prepared for them in advance. Snyder thinks something like that is happening today in our online culture. The options we are given on Facebook or on YouTube are not random: the algorithms that moderate those platforms are designed to give us more of the sort of thing we have clicked on in the past; and who knows where that information is going, or who it's being sold to. As we inhabit those spaces little by little we become predictable, we are being made predictable.

In contrast with the systems that make us predictable, Snyder talks about free people: people who make unexpected connections. He talks about Eastern Europe in the nineteen-seventies and -eighties, tracing connections between people who were part of the story of the fall of Communism. Across national and linguistic barriers, these people discovered and supported each other; out of their relationships new political movements blossomed and flourished. They brought down the Berlin Wall, and they were there to rebuild their countries afterwards. We can be like them, Snyder says. To do that we have to cultivate an openness to encountering the stranger, and a distaste for following where algorithms would prompt us to go.

Freedom, as Snyder describes it, sounds to me a lot like the frustrating, challenging, creative encounters you have in a place like Pilsdon – or even a parish church. Freedom also sounds a lot like the faith woven through prophesy and Epistle and Gospel this morning.

...You know what time it is [Saint Paul writes], how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. [Romans 13:11]

Paul goes on to condemn various behaviours: revelling and drunkenness, debauchery and licentiousness, quarelling and jealousy... Paul says those things are bad not because of old-fashioned prudishness or moralising, but because those behaviours are like falling back asleep. Or to borrow Timothy Snyder's language, they are predictable behaviours: they are addictive, they restrict the range of human possibilities, they make the people who do them easy to manipulate. I don't have a romantic picture of the freedom of a wayfarer: many of them are far too vulnerable to self-limiting and self-destructive patterns of behaviour. But there is freedom in the way those men interact in a place like Pilsdon, thanks to the hospitality they find. (And the freedom of the members of that community is enhanced by its structural openness to welcoming strangers week after week.)

Indeed, you see the freedom that about I'm talking more often in community than in lone individuals. But you do sometimes see it in people out and about in the world. In John's Gospel Jesus says,

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. [John 3:8]

I wonder if you know the sort of people I mean? People who are literally eccentric: they are obviously in orbit around some massive invisible object that passes human understanding; but even if you can't see why they are the way they are, you see the way they touch lives with unexpected grace wherever they go. Very often, of course, they have a community somewhere behind them. That is the freedom to which Christians are called.

If impulsive and addictive behaviours are like falling back asleep, then we are called to wake up. Today is the beginning of a new year. And we begin the Church's year by reminding each other – through Scripture, through music, through liturgy – that we must wake up: that we must be ready for what God might do in this new year. Will it be this year that he comes like a thief in the night, like a wayfarer in the morning? How will he find us? Are we as unpredictable as he is?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.