

Sermon on Third Sunday of Advent, 15 December 2024 by Rev. Alan Stewart

(Readings: Psalm 146 & John 1. 19-28)

Advent – A time to live

Two weeks ago, a controversial artwork by the Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan, was sold at Sotheby's in New York for a record \$6.2 million by a Chinese cryptocurrency entrepreneur. Entitled 'Comedian', the artwork consists of a banana duct-taped to a wall precisely 1.6 metres from the ground. The buyer, a Mr Sun, then went on to eat the \$6.2 million banana at a press conference. The whole thing has outraged and entertained in equal measure. 'Is it art?' is the cry of many. Or is it just bananas!?

Back in First Century Judea, the controversy of the day surrounded a certain desert-dwelling, locust-eating, hell-fire preacher called John. Huge crowds followed him into the desert to listen to this unconventional and unauthorised prophet who they called the Baptist.

News of him had made the religious establishment twitchy. So, they sent a delegation to quiz John about his identity and his intentions. 'So, are you Elijah reincarnated or the mysterious Prophet (capital P)?' they asked. 'No,' says John. 'I'm a voice

crying out in the desert, 'Make way for the Messiah'. I'm just the warm-up act'.

And his message is urgent, uncompromising and unblushing. He dares to brand the religious elite 'a brood of vipers'. He says, 'This establishment is about to topple. So, you had better repent and come clean, all of you. Make yourselves ready for the Messiah'. This message tapped into the dreams and hungers of his age where disillusion with religion was high and people were living under a harsh and cruel occupation. There was a tangible hope in the air, not unlike the hope I imagine many Syrians feel today. And the shocking thing, according to John, is that this new age begins not in the religious courts of the Temple but waist-deep in a river.

Later, into that same river, steps Jesus. And at that moment, face to face, John confronts the truth about himself. And all he can say is, 'I'm unworthy, unworthy even to lace your shoes'.

That sense of perspective, of seeing ourselves as we really are, is part of the pilgrimage we call Advent. These four weeks of reflection are a gift to prepare ourselves to celebrate not only the first Advent of God (that first Christmas) but also for his Second Coming. Advent is designed to call us out from where we feel most comfortable, so that we can begin to see more of the truth about ourselves; more of this contradiction of light and darkness, of dirt and glory.

But never, ever with the intention of judging. Always it's in the hope that in our frailty we will learn somehow to lean more upon the One who is our true strength and to comprehend just how precious this one life is.

I heard recently of a project in Australia called 'Time to Live', where people can pay to sit with a young woman called Emily Lahey for three minutes. Entering the darkness of the venue, the person is invited to sit on a spot-lit bench and watch a brief video narrated by Emily. Then she comes and sits alongside as a huge digital clock projected in front counts down from 3 minutes to zero. After that you must leave. Some sit in silence, others have a conversation, maybe they ask a question.

Usually, you'd describe this as performance art, but Emily isn't an artist. She's a terminally ill 32-year-old who doesn't know how much time she has left. 'Time to Live' was designed by the Australian Cancer Research Foundation to raise both awareness and funds.

Standing in the queue afterwards, a journalist writes: 'We bypass the chit-chat and go straight to the big topics; the experience has made us emotional and philosophical, and we end up having the kind of conversation that's rare even among friends. We talk about how considering Emily's story, and preparing to spend time with her, has had a kind of emotional and psychological ripple effect. Beyond the funds raised, and the time spent in the room, this is perhaps the enduring impact: a rare moment to grapple with the fleeting nature of life, and to connect with others in that grappling. As each of us leaves Time

to Live, Emily hands over an envelope with a card inside; it reads: "I've given you my time. Now it's your time to give that gift to someone else."

Emily understands acutely just how precious and fleeting life is. And she is freely giving some of her own extraordinarily precious time both to raise money to buy time through medical advancement for others, but also to help each person she spends time with to sit with their own vulnerability, to look their own mortality in the eye and hopefully to gain a new perspective and appreciation and joy and urgency in the living.

John recognised this same fleeting nature of life. By different methods he, too, helped others reflect and change. The message of Advent is 'time is short, so live it well'. On this Third Sunday of Advent, I'd like, therefore, to give you the gift of three minutes to sit with the silence; three minutes to sit alongside Christ and perhaps to reflect on the most important question of all; 'What am I living for?'

(Three minutes of silence)

And still, He comes, in the guise of the next person we meet. So, may we each meet in the faces and lives of others. May our lives be the gifts that others need. May we fully live this one precious life and may we each see who we truly are through the eyes of our God. Amen

