

## Sleepers wake: the Advent call to rise from the darkness and be lights in our world

Sunday 29th November 2015

*A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe*

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One of the first classical concerts I ever took part in, as a boy treble attending a German Lutheran High School named for the composer Johann Sebastian Bach, was a liturgical performance of Bach's famous Advent Cantata, 'Sleepers wake' – 'Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme'. We were all dressed in our black and white concert gear, assembled on the choir galleries of the large impressive city centre church, the orchestra at our feet, with the conductor poised to break the silence of the audience with Bach's wonderful music.

As the violins soared, the trebles called out the solemn cry of the watchman on the city wall of Jerusalem, 'Sleepers, wake, the bridegroom comes; wake up, all you who sleep in the city of Jerusalem', we sang. It was an electrifying moment when the director gave us trebles our entry: 'Wachet auf', we called in Bach's unforgettable setting of the timeless words. And the basses, tenors and altos took up our theme, calling the audience to be alert, awake; to listen to the Good News that the long awaited bridegroom had finally arrived.

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The text on which Bach's famous cantata is based is one of the last parables (or teaching stories) Jesus tells his friends, the disciples ([Matthew 25.1-13](#)): Jesus tells of those who kept alert, awake, through the night, who had kept the light going in the middle of darkness, and were able to see when the bridegroom arrived. As they joyfully entered the brightly-lit wedding hall for a midnight feast, those who had let their lights go out remained outside, were left behind in the darkness, Jesus told his friends. And encouraged them, 'be alert, therefore, for you do not know the time or the hour' (Matthew 25.12).

We do not know the time or the hour when Jesus Christ will return, joyfully like a bridegroom, to take us out of the many darkneses of our nights into his brightly-lit chambers for a feast of light. For each of us those darkneses may be different, may pose different challenges, represent different fears. For some, those nights of waiting are spent in fear or nightmares – the fear of persecution for their faith or displacement, the nightmare of terror or war; the fear of ill-health or age, the nightmare of depression and anxiety; the fear of redundancy or injury; the nightmare of unemployment, or of no longer being able of to make ends meet. Each of our nights, each of our Advents; looks and feels different.

But in each of these seasons of waiting through the hours of our nights and darkneses, we are encouraged to keep a light burning. Jesus' story tells us to keep a light burning. A light that will both cast a glimmer of hope in the darkness, and that will keep our eyes alert, wakeful, ready to see the light-filled procession when the bridegroom comes. Jesus' story tells us to keep our lamps trimmed; drawing on the resources of our faith – our prayers, our intent to love the Lord our God, and our neighbours as ourselves – in order to keep those lights burning through the night.

And Jesus' story invites us to come *together* in our waiting; to leave behind the isolation of the darkness and to seek out glimmers of other lights, others who will share with us in our season of waiting. Because where many small lights come together, there the darkness is already disappearing. Jesus' story invites us to fill the dark hours of our world with our lights, and to do so together, as a community of faith: encouraging one another as we wait for the greatest light of all to come, and extinguish all darkness forever. And as we wait, as a token of that hope, we are each given a lamp, a light, to share and to shine into the darkness, as we await the promised feast when Jesus comes again.

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I loved performing Bach's music as a child, and am delighted that I still get to sing today, once or twice a year, with the MSO Chorus. I well recall the excitement of that first performance, poised for my entry to sing the joyful song that the darkness now is over, and the bridegroom is here: 'Wachet auf', we sang, 'Sleepers wake', we sang out; telling all who would hear that those who kept their lights burning through the night were already on their way into the wedding hall, and inviting others to join the joyful feast of the Light that has overcome the darkness, of the Light that illumines even the middle of the darkest night.

The season of Advent is a bit like preparing for a musical performance, like Bach's 'Wachet auf'. Rehearsed and ready, in our concert clothes, standing in our places, with music in our hands and the song ready in our heads, watching out for the conductor to signal us to sing. Alert and awake, ready to sing out at the right signal, ready to call others to join the joyful song, ready to call any who will listen to hear that *now* is the moment to awake, to leave behind the darkness and to enter into the light.

This Advent, I give thanks for the joyful song that promises to call us from darkness to light. I give thanks for the time of preparation, the time when we rehearse that song through our prayers, our reading of the stories that remind us of God's promise that the darkness will not have the upper hand, when we share our works of hope in a world where there is still so much hopelessness. I give thanks for those who rehearse, who wait, with us, who share their light, their companionship, with us as we wait. And I give thanks for those who lead us in our song, who keep their eyes alert with us, who encourage us to keep our joyful song ready in our hearts – ready to call out: 'Sleepers, wake: the Lord is here'.