

Reading: Luke 21: 25-36

When our family was young, grandad gave the girls a video of Dad's Army. As a result, the girls, before they could even talk properly, would do impersonations of Sergeant Jones. "Don't panic Captain Mannerling. Don't panic. Don't panic." they would say in an ever-increasing panicked tone.

As we begin Advent together, the gospel gives us lots of things to panic about. Signs in the sun moon and stars, great raging of the seas and distress among the nations. These signs of the end of the age are accompanied by people fainting with fear and foreboding. But what follows next is the key. "But when you see these things taking place, stand up, raise your heads for your liberation is close at hand." Rather than panicking we are to look for signs of hope.

After a service, a lady came up to me and we got talking. She worked in a local bank. She had always been a bit grumpy, a bit short with the customers. She always scored poorly on the bank's staff reviews - until she became a Christian. Suddenly, almost miraculously, the people that got up her nose, she found she liked. She was helpful, even gracious. The boss called her in. She thought she was in trouble. "I've noticed a real change in you," he said, "you are so much better with the customers. What's happened to you?" And she was able to explain she had found the peace of being a Christian.

Bashir had a similar experience but in a totally different context. He went to a Muslim school in his native Somalia. On leaving school he was trained as a Muslim militant, and he was told that if he died fighting, he would go straight to heaven. He was given a machine gun and put on roadblock duty. It was his job to search each vehicle for Bibles. He stopped one vehicle and he told the trader to step aside, or he would shoot him. In the cargo were comics. They didn't look like Bibles, so he asked the trader for one which he willingly gave him. Later at the camp he found a quiet corner and began reading. Soon he realised this was a story of a man just like him who had discovered Jesus. He felt jealous of the man in the comic, and something inside him told him he wanted Jesus rather than al-Shabaab. He sneaked off into the shrubs, and after two weeks of wandering found an underground church. "I am going to be baptised soon," Bashir recounts, "I have found peace with Jesus".

The difficulty at this time of year is that we are entering the silly season. People say to you, "Mate, we need it by Christmas." We seem to oscillate between two extremes. Pleasure and anxiety. We want those close to us to have a wonderful Christmas, but we forget that Christmas joy doesn't come in a present. Rather, it comes in how we are present to one another. We have so many things on our to do lists and yet we forget that Christmas isn't a to do list. It is a way of being. We are after all not human doings but human beings.

As we grow in trust of Jesus we learn to live beyond anxiety and grow in anticipation. We anticipate the coming of Christ as we work for peace and justice in the now.

All of us great and small alike face our own times of testing. But are we going to give into anxiety or are we going to find peace? It's all too easy this season to lose our focus on Jesus as the reason for the season and transplant so many other concerns instead.

An unknown author put it like this:

*CHRISTMAS LOVE*

(Paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 13)

*If I decorate my house perfectly with beautiful bows, strands of twinkling lights and shiny balls, but do not show love, I'm just another decorator.*

*If I slave away in the kitchen, baking dozens of Christmas cookies, preparing gourmet meals and arranging a beautifully adorned table at mealtime, but do not show love, I'm just another cook.*

*If I work at the soup kitchen, carol in the rest home, and give all that I have to charity, but do not show love, it profits me nothing.*

*If I trim the tree with shimmering angels and crocheted snowflakes, attend a myriad of holiday parties and sing in the choir cantata but do not focus on Christ, I have missed the point.*

*If I go to the gym seven times a week to keep me as fit as a fiddle but do not make my body a temple of the Holy Spirit, I am just a collection of muscle.*

*Love stops the cooking to hug the child.*

*Love sets aside the decorating to kiss the spouse.*

*Love is kind, though harried and tired.*

*Love doesn't envy another's home that has coordinated Christmas china and table linens.*

*Love doesn't yell at the kids to get out of the way.*

*Love doesn't give only to those who are able to give in return but rejoices in giving to those who can't.*

*Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

*Love never fails. Computer games will break, pearl necklaces will be lost, golf clubs will rust, but giving the gift of LOVE will endure.*

*When we see signs of change, chaos, and challenges all around us, rejoice because our liberation is close at hand. Don't panic!*