

Sermon preached by the Revd Dr Andrew Wakeham-Dawson RAF  
at St Edmundsbury Cathedral

## **The Second Sunday of Advent**

'Fahrenheit 451'

Sunday 10 December 2017

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May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

I am sure many of you are familiar with the science fiction classic 'Fahrenheit 451' written in 1950 by Ray Bradbury – it tells of a world alarmingly similar to our own. In the story, books have been banned and the hero, Guy Montag, is a fireman. His job is not to extinguish fires, but to start fires and, more specifically, to burn books – books are seen as the cause of ambiguity, discord and all human distress. One fireman says: 'We stand against the small tide of those who want to make everyone unhappy with conflicting theory and thought.'

Fahrenheit 451 is the temperature at which paper burns. When Montag and his team have a tip-off that someone is harbouring a secret library, they put on their beetle-black salamander helmets, slither down the fire pole, jump aboard their fire engine and dash to the scene. Generally when the fire team arrives to douse the books in kerosene and burn them to ashes, the police have already been and gone, having arrested the criminal hoarder of books and taken them away to exact justice.

But this time, the fire team arrives before the police get there and finds that an elderly lady is still standing among a pile of abhorrent books. She quotes the famous words of Bishop Hugh Latimer when

he and Bishop Nicholas Ridley were burnt at the stake - Protestant heretics in Oxford on the 16<sup>th</sup> of October 1555.

'Be of good comfort Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England, as (I trust) shall never be put out.'

To the fire team's horror the lady refuses to leave her house and actually ignites the kerosene herself – destroying the books and herself. Traumatized by this experience, Montag says of books to his wife:

'It took [someone] a lifetime maybe to put some of [their] thoughts down, looking around at the world and life, and then I came along in two minutes and boom! it's all over.'

'Let me alone,' said Mildred his wife, 'I can't do anything.'

'Let you alone! That's all very well, but how can I leave myself alone? We need not to be let alone. We need to be really bothered once in a while. How long is it since you were really bothered? About something important, about something real?'

I hope that you have not experienced anything shocking that has disturbed you this morning, something that has really bothered you – and if it has, then I hold you and that situation in my prayers. I know we've got snow falling this morning - but generally, I expect it has been for you, as for me, a rather routine morning: breakfast, perhaps some household chores, maybe time with family and friends. I expect your journey to church this morning has been largely uneventful. Possibly even on autopilot. Perhaps you have taken your usual parking place and are now in your usual pew. Or perhaps it was a relatively easy walk through Bury.

And now we heard the familiar and comforting words of Isaiah and the opening verses of Mark's Gospel – of John the Baptist appearing in the wilderness and calling people to repentance and baptism in the Jordan. And we know he is the Advent forerunner of Jesus and that when we hear these words, Christmas is not far away. We can come to worship, and sing our carols, and gossip and maybe get involved in some local church politics, and complain about change. Or maybe we are feeling comfortable about our lot in life – even a little smug, or worst perhaps we are feeling a little apathetic.

Indeed, we need sometimes to be disturbed – as Guy Montag of 'Fahrenheit 451' says.

The Gospel of Mark is disturbing: it recounts the disturbing transition from Law to Grace. The Bible is a dangerous book full of 'conflicting theory and thought.' The New Testament records the shift in understanding that the first Christians experienced, when they began to understand that our relationship with God can only go so far if our lives are ruled as then by the Law of the Old Testament and now by our prejudice. God is love, it is by grace that he calls us and it is by grace that we must welcome all others who acknowledge that God is love, however different they may be from ourselves.

And over history, and still today in many parts of the world, Christianity is a dangerous faith – Jesus was put to death, as have been many Christians around the world over the last 2000 years for their faith; Ridley and Latimer are but two. And all faith can be dangerous – think of the Muslims massacred in Egypt at Friday prayers a few weeks ago. The real cost of faith can seem so far from us – we enjoy the privileged of peace in this country.

I was disturbed recently on a visit to Baghdad a few weeks ago. I had been sent out to lead the Coalition Remembrance service at the British Embassy. We had readings from the Gospel and verses from the Koran were intoned by the Imam. One evening we were physically shaken by an earthquake, which measured 7.2 on Richter Scale where some lives were lost. But even more disturbing was my visit to St George's Church in Baghdad.

St George's is the only Anglican Church in Iraq. It used to serve the ex-patriot British community in Baghdad, having been built after the Mesopotamian Campaign in the First World War. It was closed during the First Gulf War (1991) and not reopened until 2003 after the Second Gulf War (2003) by Justin Welby (Archbishop of Canterbury).

The RAF's Chaplain-in-Chief had asked that if it were possible would I visit St George's to have a look at the projects we have been helping to fund from our Royal Air Force station churches collections funds. But, given the security issues, he thought it unlikely I would get a chance. However, the Ambassador was keen to accept an invitation from the church to visit and took me through the Red Zone to St George's in an armoured Landrover convoy – road blocks and armoured vehicles everywhere. Some small arms fire – but it may only have been celebratory – a wedding perhaps.

St George's has enjoyed international fame as a result of the reconciliation work of Canon Andrew White. Its current vicar Fr Faiz Jerjes has a thriving congregation of Iraqi Christians, who are most welcomed-in as an integral part of Iraqi society by reasonable

Muslims – but still persecuted by Islamist extremists. The congregation has to come to services on special buses, pass through security checks and enter a high-security compound. Only recently a suicide bomber was arrested before he could detonate in the church.

Just imagine that happen here, now – right in the middle of us. How different from our own experience of coming to worship this morning.

And Fr Faiz showed us round the new school that they are building, showed us the clinic that provides free medical and dental care to the local community and the church's food bank that provides for some of the poorest people in the area.

What can we do to support them? Of course our financial support will further their projects (they have a St George's, Baghdad website). And our prayers for the truly Christian work they do in the most dangerous conditions.

My visit to St George's certainly disturbed me, shook me out of my complacency and reminded me what the true cost of Christianity can be.

I close with a poem attributed to Sir Francis Drake, 1577

Disturb us, Lord, when  
We are too well pleased with ourselves,  
When our dreams have come true  
Because we have dreamed too little,  
When we arrived safely  
Because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, Lord, when  
With the abundance of things we possess  
We have lost our thirst  
For the waters of life;  
Having fallen in love with life,  
We have ceased to dream of eternity  
And in our efforts to build a new earth,  
We have allowed our vision  
Of the new Heaven to dim.

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,  
To venture on wider seas  
Where storms will show your mastery;  
Where losing sight of land,  
We shall find the stars.

We ask You to push back  
The horizons of our hopes;  
And to push into the future  
In strength, courage, hope, and love.

Amen.

Revd Dr Andrew Wakeham-Dawson RAF  
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