

Not Advent again!

27 November 2022

Advent Sunday

Rev. Alan Keeler

Isaiah 2.1-5

Romans 13.11-14

Matthew 24.36-44

Advent

Today is Advent Sunday and we begin a new liturgical year. Our church life is framed by celebrations. Advent prepares us for Christmas and Epiphany. Lent prepares us for Easter and Pentecost. It could look like this is all very circular and we keep going around the same path year by year. But let me try and persuade you that as much as this is Advent Sunday it should not be Advent Sunday again. This is Advent Sunday 2022 and the purposes of God and our worship of him are moving forward.

It is easy as we live month by month and year by year to think the life is stable and dependable. but in the last few years surely we can't hold onto that. With Brexit, a pandemic and a major war in Europe we might actually feel the opposite now. Life seems unpredictable if not frightening.

The message of Advent is that we believe in a God of progress and particularly when life seems to be chaotic to receive the promise of hope and that God is working his purposes out.

Winter

Advent takes place in winter. At least here in the northern hemisphere. The sun is low in the sky and does not give so much light. The days are short and the evenings are soon dark. The weather is cold and less hospitable.

Many people will decorate their homes with a fir tree. This is for the British a recent addition from Prince Albert in the nineteenth century. It is the symbol of eternal life for the fir tree does not give up its foliage in winter. And of course there in the marking of the days of December with perhaps an Advent Candle to give light in darkness or an Advent Calendar with a chocolate to give extra sweetness.

As much as Advent is about preparing for the birth of Jesus we seek to be with family and plan a feast. With both we are looking for something better. For the world to be renewed and to celebrate the hope we have. We prepare for the celebration of Christmas. With feast and faith we are fortifying ourselves against the rigours of life.

Isaiah

The roots of Advent go back into the Old Testament. When the Hebrews moved to the promised-land they encountered societies that were formed by their agriculture. The Canaanites believed that time was circular and each year you passed though the same seasons and arrived back to where you had started. With a circular view of time you are in a cage with no way out. But the Hebrews formed a view of God who had made the world and he had purposes that were continuing to be unfolded. Time was not so much a circle as an arrow with progress being made.

It was not just agriculture that was seen to be cyclical it was also the rise and fall of empires that could be brutal and enslaving. In the reading we had from Isaiah the prophet is announcing that the world will change and with the famous words says:

they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any.

This is an astonishing thing to hear even for us not least after the huge wars of the twentieth century. We also now face the recent events in Ukraine. Isaiah does not mean the making of peace is obvious or inevitable. His words are a statement about the character of God and the world not being trapped in doing the same thing over and over again. Isaiah's words have the character of Advent because when we experience the dark deeds of the world there will be light and where we taste bitterness there will be sweetness. Isaiah says that that God has purposes beyond the usual round of events, He is working them out and we are to be people of hope.

The immediate target of Isaiah words was the Babylonian empire. This disappeared not long after Isaiah had spoken. Isaiah's people, the Jews are still with us and are a very significant nation in the world. The ways of God last. The ways of empire pass. Sadly the ways of warfare have still to be properly tamed.

Romans

Living in this world is not easy. but it is the deep conviction of the Christian faith that God is with us to strengthen us and to be at work and transform the world into a good place.

We heard a passage from Paul's letter to the church in Rome. There can be romantic views

about the Romans. They were organised, brought an order to many of their surrounding nations and built cities that had wonderful architecture. But Rome society was built on slavery which was full of cruelty. About a third of the residents of the Roman empire were slaves. As an example of how bad slavery was there is the account of a slave who murdered his master who was a senior politician. That was an action that had to be demonstrated to be wrong. As a sign that such acts would not be tolerated the four hundred other slaves of the politician were crucified.

A big part of the background to the New Testament is that Christians would face persecution. Another cruel behaviour of the Roman state. In the face of this cruel society Paul tells his fellow Christians to 'put on the armour of light'. It is about living in a holy way. To be light. But it is also to be done with strength and determination. There is the image of armour, preparing for a struggle.

Paul's words might sound a bit moralistic. He says Christians should not behave with revelling, drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarrelling and jealousy. Perhaps we don't want to be told off in this way. But supposing Paul is giving very wise counsel in a tough world.

Faced with hardship we may wish to be consoled rather than fortified. We may wish to avoid the challenge rather than face up to it with strength. Supposing Paul is full of Advent hope and the trials of this life can be defeated because God is with us to guide and give us the power required. He is saying 'know Christ, face the darkness and God will equip you for the struggle.

As with war which is still with us, troubles will not all be overcome in this life. But Paul is convinced that we can have a greater vision than the corruption of the world in which we live and progress can be made to make it a better place.

Jesus

The person who had a truly Advent understanding of life and God, was Jesus. He had an ability to see deeply into life and bring forth new meanings. He was able to be with people who were downtrodden and give them hope and new opportunity. Jesus knew that he would bring a new way for humans to live.

In his teaching Jesus was not held by the prejudices of his day. He could speak for instance of a Good Samaritan when the people around him

would despise Samaritans. Jesus had respect for each person he met whether they respected him or not. But it wasn't just what he said but how he said it. The Good Samaritan is a character in a parable and the nature of a parable is to respect the person spoken to and invite their engagement. Jesus the teacher had complete respect for the people he was talking to.

The encounters Jesus had with people could be very fraught. In the way that he accepted the outcast and people of other nations Jesus had to display courage. At times he would do this in a very provocative way by healing on the Sabbath or praising a sinful gate crasher instead of respecting the host. Jesus understood the value of people and was prepared to put their inclusion before social order, polite practise or even established rules.

But Jesus had a sense that he was not just being kind in a courageous way or teaching with a new sense of wisdom. Jesus understood his Heavenly Father to be deeply at work in him. Jesus believed the long hopes of the Hebrew people expressed in people such as Isaiah we're going to be fulfilled in him.

This was not something people of his time really understood. Some people gave him loyalty and adulation. We all like a hero.

Some people like the scribes and Pharisees recognised him as powerful but not in a good way.

Some people began to think he was bringing the fulfilment that his nation had longed hoped for., particularly the rebellious and Zealots. Even so Jesus did not want to be called the Messiah because he saw the fulfilment happening very differently from popular expectations of just getting rid of the Roman occupiers and re-establishing a strong nationalism.

Jesus understood that he was not just light for a few who were close to him, or inspiration for his own people. God was at work in him for him to be the light of the world.

Hope

Advent is full of many themes. It is an invitation to recognise the trouble of our lives and the world in which we live. It is to prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus. But all of this is a beginning as we live and serve in hope that there will be an end to pain, tears and violence and that one day sin and death will be defeated.