

Advent 2

How many of us are longing for life to be good again? I would imagine that for most of the world there is a yearning for the moment when we can go out of our front doors without a mask, without wondering whether we can shop or not, whether we can meet up with a friend for coffee, whether we need to stand 2 metres from our neighbour as we chat about the weather and of course when we can hug our grandchildren or our grandparents. We just want to go back to normal. We want to live a life of freedom again. Not a few people have turned to the internet or to the TV box sets for forms of escapism? How many of us have bought all sorts of things from Amazon that we don't really need, - somehow even having something we can choose and have delivered reminds us that we are actually free. But are we simply looking back with rose-tinted spectacles to a life that was actually unsustainable, to a way of life of security, where we were in control, where we didn't really need God to do anything and indeed where we would rather not be disrupted by his presence among us?

Last week, as we began our Advent journey, I asked you to consider what it might mean to look forward with renewed vision, to scan the horizon, watching and waiting for the signs of God's Kingdom. This week I want to think a little more about what we are looking for. For Christians, it seems to me, that we cannot simply put our trust in a vaccine that might stop us getting the corona virus. We are called, especially in this season of preparation, to place a greater trust in God's goodness and his coming amongst us.

Last week I painted a hope-filled picture of heaven; being a place of intimacy, of adventure and beauty. This week I want to spend a few moments thinking about the implications of the second coming of Jesus. The New Testament looks eagerly toward the time when Jesus will come again. Christians in the first century believed that it would come in their lifetime, although Jesus is very clear that we are not to know the time when he will return. We often treat Advent as if it is all about the countdown to Christmas; our children open their advent calendars and our focus is a little sweet baby lying in the hay. Our culture loves the idea of new birth with all the potential that brings. Jesus in the manger feels very safe and warm. But I want to suggest that if we focus only on the baby Jesus, we miss the point of Advent.

C S Lewis said *“there are many reasons why the modern Christian may hesitate to give the doctrine of Christ’s second coming the emphasis which was usually laid upon it by our ancestors, and yet it seems to me impossible to retain in any recognisable form, our belief in the divinity of Christ and the truth of the Christian revelation while abandoning the promised return. He goes on to say, if this is not an integral part of the faith once given to the saints then I don’t know what is.”*

I want to assert that the coming of Christ at the end of this age is the point where God finally sets the story of our existence right. The rescue plan that begun in the stable 2000 years ago is brought to its culmination. We long and pray for justice and peace to permeate across our world and in our own homes and communities and although clearly God calls the Church to bring elements of peace and justice to the communities we serve in the here and now, it will only fully come when Christ returns. We have an important role, like John the Baptist, to prepare the way for the Lord. It is so important that the Church doesn’t put up barriers to faith and encounter with God – the Church must never be a private club for the benefit of its members. In fact it is only being the Church when it is doing exactly the opposite, everything we do must point to the goodness and renewing power of Jesus. We are involved in the breaking down of barriers, making the rough places smooth, the uneven ground level.

One of the challenges we face in the relativism of western culture, is the question of judgement. In past centuries the Church has misused her commission to scare people into belief. Paintings of the past tend to depict an angry God, while the apocalyptic films of the last decades tend to focus on nuclear annihilation or natural global catastrophe. How can we say that the Judeao-Christian God has the right to bring a reign of justice and goodness. We would much prefer to have control over what is just and what is not because we can prove that our way of thinking is right and every other way of thinking is mis-guided. Afterall most people think that their view of reality is generally right and works for them.

As we cope with the pandemic and especially the fear of death, we need to recognise that our confidence and certainty have been thrown into the air. The Church has to find fresh ways of articulating the sure basis for our hope, based in the death and resurrection of Jesus, that in truth death has been defeated,

that there is nothing to fear and that the end of the age is not primarily a story about loss, anger and death, but is about God setting things right and making all things new. Although we celebrate new vaccines and the wonderful ingenuity of the scientists who have created them, they are ultimately NOT what we place our hope in. If anything our scientists have joined our politicians in the last months as those we are sceptical of. The Church needs to in the words of Walter Bruggemann, redescribe reality and use language that places our desire to control outcomes firmly under the rock of our salvation. This is formidably hard because we have come to live as though this life is as good as it gets, but we have to meditate on scripture that over and over again tells us that we are loved and cherished and that death, our last enemy has been defeated. That goodness WILL triumph over evil and that God longs for that moment when he can make all things new. As Bishop Nick says: *Advent is an opportunity to help people live with the transient provisionality of human life in a world we cannot simply control. It offers the space in which we can imagine ourselves into the Story anew, and maybe find ourselves surprised by joy as we catch even faint echoes of 'home'.*

I want to end by taking two images from our two readings.

The first is the image from Isaiah of those who trust in God being drawn up as if they are on the wings of eagles. God promises that he doesn't grow weary or faint and that as we press into our faith we work with the Holy Spirit to redescribe the reality around us, believing in the God who wants to do immeasurably more than we can ever ask or imagine. Praying boldly for God's Kingdom to not just be something of the future, but something that we take hold of and introduce now. As we walk in step with the Spirit we will find rest and confidence, even in the midst of our exhaustion and God will lift us up and literally give us God's perspective. We will see people and situations as he sees them and that in and of itself will give us the energy to keep walking hand in hand with God.

The second thing is John's comment that Jesus will not baptise us with water, but with the Holy Spirit. This is both comforting and scary at the same time. Comforting because God gives us his eyes to see and ears to hear if only we are open to his work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Scary, because the Holy Spirit rarely leaves us to go about our day to day lives unchanged. The Holy Spirit disrupts our thinking, our priorities, she disturbs the status quo and undermines those places where we thought we had control. The Holy Spirit is working to get us to place our trust firmly in the rock of our salvation, firmly on the Son, who yes was born in Bethlehem, but died and was raised so that we might have life in all its fullness.