

Downing Place United Reformed Church
Sunday 1st December 2019.
Sermon – The Revd. Dr. John P. Bradbury
Isaiah 2: 1-5, Matthew 24: 36-44

We are surrounded by people this Advent making us promises. The sunlit uplands of Brexit or a socialist utopia await, depending on quite who you believe – or maybe if Brexit is just cancelled, all the troubles and woes of the country will disappear. Or not. If I sound a little cynical – that’s because I am. Across the western world, it feels like we live in the age of the quick-fix – vote for me and I’ll wave a magic wand and everything will be well. Tempting though it is to believe that this is the way things work – reality is not quite like that.

And that can also be the danger of the first Sunday in Advent. One day God will wave a magic wand and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well. The mountain of the Lord will arrive, the good, or the bad, depending on which way you look at it, will be zapped from the earth. Jesus will return and all will be well. Christianity can be just as good at doing false hope as some politicians.

And yet – at the heart of our faith stands a vision. A vision of what will be. A vision of God’s Kingdom. It comes to us in all kinds of ways. This morning it is in the form of a mountain. An extensive vision – all the nations of the Lord will stream towards this mountain of the Lord’s house. It is a vision of peace: swords will be beaten into ploughshares, and spears into pruning hooks. Nations will not go to war with one another anymore. We will all walk the paths of the Lord as he teaches us his ways.

It is a vision that comes in other forms in other places in scripture. It is the Holy City, the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven. It is the banquet on the top of the mountain. It is the overflowing, out of control yeast bubbling up and bubbling over. It is the lost coin which has been found. It is the moment that all will be in all in Christ, when we will see Christ face to face.

So, what vision do you live by? What vision do we, as a congregation, live by? What vision will shape the way you vote? And is this not all as much pie in the sky when you die as we fear election promises might be?

This, in its way, concerns the writer of Matthew’s gospel. The section of the gospel that our text comes from this morning is one where the hopes of the early Christian communities are being addressed in Matthew’s recounting of the Jesus story. Matthew frames this section of his gospel with a question from the disciples: “Tell us,” they ask, “when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” Jesus responds by the stark warning: “Beware that no one leads you astray”. And indeed, many have attempted to lead the faithful astray over the years answering this question. We, of course, know the answer. We will wake up on Friday 13th December, and our woes will be gone, every tear will be wiped from every eye, and there will be universal flourishing.

Jesus, however, is rather more ambiguous about when the fulness of salvation will be fully realised: “About that day and hour no one know, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

He goes on and calls the disciples to remain watchful and awake. He goes on, in the next bit of text to tell stories of those who did just that. The faithful slave who, when the master goes away, carries on, carrying on. For that simple performance of his duties whilst the master is not there, the slave is rewarded. Then comes the parable of the bridesmaids – the ones with sufficient oil in their lamp, who had prepared to wait a good while, they are the ones that get into the wedding. Then come the parable of the talents – those who in the absence of the master enable the wealth of the master to flourish are the ones commended. In all these stories, it is not those who watch and wonder and predict when the moment will come, whilst paying not attention to the here and now who flourish. Rather, all these stories are about the ones who carry on with their work and their responsibility not knowing when the master will return, but when he does, of course, they are found to have faithfully carried on, carrying on.

So, we find in our scriptures today both that remarkable vision of the Kingdom, the future which we await and anticipate, and we find the command to carry on carrying on – attending to our duties here and now.

And in this tension between the big vision, and the daily responsibilities of life, I think we find something both simple and remarkable. For our vision of the future is vital. It is that sense of what the Kingdom is to be, like that mountain top, that vision of peace, that shapes who we are in the here and now. But in the here and now we are called to our

daily tasks, lived out expectantly in the hope of that vision, shaped by that vision, but rooted in the daily round of reality in which we find ourselves.

Whoever forms a government on the 13th of this month, will not wake up to a land of milk and honey. They will wake up to the daily grind of governing. Of making decisions, laying plans, deciding how to spend money, making the machinery of government work. Whatever it might sound like they want us to believe – nothing will be different on the 13th of December than on the 12th. Well... I say that...nothing about where we are as a nation will be different, but what might be different is the vision empowering that daily grind of governing.

We would be wise to be wary of those who do not seem to think that the daily grind of getting on with things competently matters. Soundbites achieve nothing. But equally, we should be deeply aware of the visions that are being presented to us – such as we can make them out amidst the cacophony of tweeting, facebooking, commentating, and shouting. For the vision that people hold to shapes their daily living. Is this a vision, like that of Isaiah, that is expansive, broad and encompassing, or narrow, and self-obsessed? Is this a vision for peace and human flourishing? Or a vision that leads to division and brokenness? Is this a vision for justice among nations, and justice within our nations? Or is it a vision in which the scales are tipped against some in favour of others? Is this a vision for the flourishing of the whole planet – something Isaiah dwells on, or a purely economic vision of the growth of mammon? These are questions with which we might wish to preoccupy ourselves before we vote. Questions which, frankly, at this particular moment in our political history might be rather harder to determine than sometimes. To discern as best we can is what we are called to do, however.

And, of course, this is not just about our political life, even if that is set to dominate this Advent. It is also about what we as a church community, and what we as human beings at our most fundamental level yearn for, and the vision we have of what God would have us be. If all we do is the carrying on carrying on of ordinary everyday life, we become ground down, worn out, we run spiritually dry. If all we have is the grand vision, and the hope that one day it will all be sorted so we might as well not bother today, that the world here and now will not be shaped by that vision, in however small a way. So, as we look to Christ's coming, let us attend to the vision. Let us be in awe of the mountain place which is the dwelling place of God who draws all nations to that mountain, a place of justice, peace and human flourishing. And let us too, attend to the daily things that make up our vocation as followers of Christ, and as his people the Church. For if we do, we may well indeed be alert to the Christ who comes into the midst of the world, and calls us to follow. Amen.