



Sermon preached by Penny Flynn on 10th December 2023

Readings: Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1: 1-8; 2 Peter 3:8-15

Advent II

Prayer: 'O come, Christ the Saviour, from below, from above, and infect the depths of earth with heavenly love.' [Cloth for the Cradle, p.132 WGRG]

In a newspaper last Tuesday, there was a picture of a very different nativity scene in Bethlehem. You may have seen it and read about it. In the midst of a pile of rubble lies a baby doll, covered with a cloth – head visible at one end, feet and legs at the other. Behind it's head, a lit candle in a jar; peering or scrambling over the rocks behind or either side, traditional wooden carved figures of Mary, Joseph, a shepherd and magi. This scene is in the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church, and takes the place of the traditional Christmas tree, using war debris to represent destruction in Gaza. Instead of the usual busy time in Bethlehem, it is quiet and sombre now. For the first time in many years, no Christmas tree has been put up in Bethlehem Square and churches are planning religious services without the usual festive events and decorations. The baby doll is 'normal size' and the wooden other figures look small compared, out of proportion. The baby is in the most prominent position in the 'tableau'. Seeing the newspaper photo was a sombre reminder, as if one was needed, of the destruction within Gaza, not many miles from Bethlehem, and a poignant response by those who live there. How *could* the usual festivities and celebrations possibly take place?

Despite such scenes, and because they are set on a regular 3-year pattern, the scripture readings we've heard today are full of good news and hope. Prophets of old spoke into difficult, even disastrous times and events, with words from the Lord designed to challenge and change.

Any familiar with Handel's oratorio 'Messiah' will have recognised countless phrases in the Isaiah passage this morning. I imagine you will have been singing in your heads

- 'Comfort ye my people'
- 'Every valley shall be exalted'
- 'And the glory, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed – all people shall see it together – for the mouth of the Lord has spoken'
- And many more - how much did Handel use these words of Isaiah?

Why didn't we simply have a choral service today?!

The music of these pieces enhances the uplifting words, reassuring, encouraging ...

Isaiah did also state the problem though – 'All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass.'

And yet, despite people withering, fading, being blown around too easily, the prophet says 'but the word of our God will stand for ever.' The contrast is clear.

- O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, get thee up into the high mountain – lift up your voice with strength; be not afraid; say to the cities of Judah, 'Behold your God!'
- And the final verse Handel set to much gentler music: 'He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.' ie the mother sheep.

Isaiah was writing to people displaced, living their own lives among rubble, in a wilderness caused by exile. The situation is dire. These exiles had given up any hope of returning – several generations

would have come and gone. Some had turned to other gods. So the Lord's words of comfort were timely. The prophet points to the glory of God, to God's power as Creator. We heard prophecy foretelling the coming of one who turned out to be John the Baptist; we heard of the frailty of humanity, blown about as it is like grass; we heard the announcement of the coming of the Lord, the good shepherd. We heard much gentleness within the power and glory of God. Such love – such desire for God's people to be put right.

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For the writer of Mark's gospel, the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ came as Jesus was about to start his adult ministry, as his cousin John appeared in the wilderness, calling people to repent of their sins and baptising them with water; all the time announcing the coming of one greater than himself who would go one further – baptising with the Holy Spirit. Malcolm Guite captures the essence of this last prophet in his sonnet 'St John the Baptist: 1 St John's Eve': (*from 'Sounding the Seasons' Canterbury Press*)

Midsummer night, and bonfires on the hill
Burn for the man who makes way for the Light:
'He must increase and I diminish still,
Until his sun illuminates my night.'
So John the Baptist pioneers our path,
Unfolds the essence of the life of prayer,
Unlatches the last doorway into faith,
And makes one inner space an everywhere.
Least of the new and greatest of the old,
Orpheus on the threshold with his lyre,
He sets himself aside, and cries "Behold
The One who stands amongst you comes with fire!"
So keep his fires burning through this night,
Beacons and gateways for the child of light.

John's message strikes a distinctive note, inviting people to "repent for the forgiveness of sins" (v4). Translating the Greek word *metanoia* as "repentance" has a long history among western Bible translators, but it misses something significant. In common use today the word often carries the negative connotation that we've got it wrong and are to blame for all the mess (*which may well be true!*), but its original implication was more like "there's a better way to live, so come and be a part of it". In other words, a recognition of the brokenness that is all around us - *that rubble, that wilderness* – but with an understanding that, while we all have the capacity to choose to be intentional wrongdoers, we are caught up in something much bigger than our own small lives, entangled in a web of sinful structures ('fallenness') – a theme that is more fully spelled out in the rest of the gospel as Jesus invites us to join Him in the new way of being. ...

from <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/worship/weekly-worship/monthly/2023-december/second-sunday-of-advent-year-b-10-december-2023>

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We have just sung 'Heaven shall not wait for the poor to lose their patience – for the rich to share their fortunes – for the dawn of great ideas – for triumphant hallelujahs – we sang 'Jesus is Lord ...' and four good reasons for that statement - Yet it seems the Lord is waiting for God's right time. And the Lord accompanies us through this Advent time, as we find ways to wait for Him.

Heaven shall not wait – and yet Peter's letter tells us of a patient God

'The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.' And as Peter explains this, he instructs the readers of this letter to consider 'what sort of people ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, ¹² waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God.' That word 'hastening' – how are we to do that? I gather *the original word means to "earnestly desire" something - to want it so*

badly that you are always pushing for it. In the same way that you might tell a child that is so “earnestly desiring” Christmas morning to arrive that they are “wishing away” the rest of the month, the picture here is that we are so eager for the coming of Christ that we are so focused on His coming that everything we do is part of wanting it to come. But while God may be patient, we are warned that ‘this doesn’t mean the Second Coming of Christ will be delayed until we get out there and do our job of evangelism - if God is not speeding up the date of Christ’s return because of our exceptional work, He’s not delaying it because of our failure (either). But what this does mean is that we can have confidence to know that the acts of ministry and love and evangelism and service that we .. carry out in His Name are effective in His hands as instruments to bring about His Second Coming! <https://sermons.logos.com/sermons/670344-2-peter-3:8-15-patience-in-the-waiting> [my italics, to change pronouns]

We play our part in the hastening, as we live out our calling.

We learn from Isaiah, John, Peter and of course many others:

- Don’t be afraid to speak out
- Point away from ourselves and towards Jesus
- Strive, work at preparing ourselves to be ready for when the Lord comes.

Perhaps this latter can be done by attending to words from the psalm for today, Psalm 85: v8 ‘Let me hear what the Lord will speak’ v9 ‘surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him’ v10 ‘Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.’

Jane Williams writes: ‘so make the most of this period of waiting, be grateful for Advent and use it, not just to prepare for the birth of the baby, but also to prepare a world where this baby, righteousness incarnate, will be at home.’ [*Jane Williams ‘Lectionary Reflections Yr B p 5*]

As we wait this Advent, in preparation for the Lord to come, we can consider the rubble or the wilderness of our own lives; we can think of that scene in Bethlehem, built up with concrete and stones from a disaster, with the symbolic baby placed at the top, in full view from all angles; and we can be encouraged by more words from Psalm 85: ¹² The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase.

¹³ Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps.’

Amen.

Penny Flynn

10th December 2023