



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2023

Readings: Isaiah 64.1-9; I Corinthians 3.1-9; Mark 13.24-37

Advent Sunday

## I QUE SERA SERA?

How good it is that we do not know when serious illnesses will attack us. Could we live with a diary that indicated they were due in X years or Y months? Of course not. But not knowing when they are going to arrive, shouldn't stop us living vigilantly, healthily, so that if and when they visit us we are as well prepared as we can be. And although we know the fittest of us can succumb to the most unanticipated of diseases, we are not very wise – nor are we very thoughtful of our loved ones – if we fatalistically adopt a careless life style, simply because 'Que sera sera', whatever will be will be. <sup>1</sup> As I read in an article about habits to avoid in retirement, 'do not give up on eating and exercising healthily'. <sup>2</sup>

We are deeply sobered by today's world – its economic volatility, its ecological fragility, its ecumenical fissures. It can sometimes feel as if it is sick to the core. People of faith look to that One who is 'Source, Guide and Goal of all that is' <sup>3</sup> for hope. Despite parables of darkened suns, falling stars and fruiting figs, we do not know when or how God will act decisively to put right this sickness, but that mustn't get in the way of us living in readiness for God to do so, for what one theologian calls 'God's God-ing'. <sup>4</sup>

In part, Advent is the Church's season of preparing us to celebrate Jesus' birth long ago in that 'little town of Bethlehem'; though this year can we really sing, 'how still we see thee lie'? <sup>5</sup> At the same time, Advent is a month of earnest and active looking for God's activity *now*, a light that will disperse some of these shadows. As such, it is a time for taking that sensible medical readiness and applying it to life more broadly.

## II PROPHECY AND APOCALYPSE

From Isaiah we heard **prophecy**, and from St Mark we heard **apocalypse** - what might otherwise be called 'revelation'. <sup>6</sup> As styles of writing, they are related genre that are intended not as *words of prognostication*, by which the writers predict exact details of the future, so much as *words of preparation and warning* that spur us into being ready for the future, always. Precisely because we do not know when an illness is coming, we must live each day with wise attitudes to healthy eating and exercise, and so it is with trust in God. Isaiah and Mark do not offer us clues as to *when* God will go a-God-ing. Rather, they are more general pointers to the fact that God is forever working out God's purpose, so we should be forever ready. And Advent readiness is about taking God seriously – all that God offers and asks – because we believe that God takes us seriously.

As I reflected upon the readiness that Isaiah and Mark inspire this Advent, I was struck by four couplets, each ending with the word 'down'. 'Look down', 'come down', 'put down', and 'calm down'.

## III SECOND AND THIRD ISAIAH

In Isaiah 63 – the chapter before the one we heard – the people are deeply disappointed. Isaiah's a book of three distinct sections – almost certainly from different periods and with different authors.

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<sup>1</sup> Livingston, Jay 1915-2001 and Ray Evans 1915-2007, the opening of the song, *Que sera sera*

<sup>2</sup> Brown Jeanette 2023 *If you want to be happier in your retirement, say goodbye to these 10 habits* Available at <https://ideapod.com/if-you-want-to-be-happier-in-your-retirement-say-goodbye-to-these-10-habits/>; accessed 1<sup>st</sup> December 2023

<sup>3</sup> Romans 11.36 (New English Bible)

<sup>4</sup> Brueggemann, Walter 2008 *Prayers for a Privileged People* Nashville: Abingdon Press pp 3f

<sup>5</sup> Phillips Brooks 1835-93, from the carol *O little town of Bethlehem* RS 145.1.1f

<sup>6</sup> cf Hanson, Paul D. 1995 *Isaiah 40-66* in the Interpretation series of Bible commentaries Louisville: John Knox Press pages 185ff; and Hooker, Morna D. 1991 *The Gospel according to Mark* London: A & C Black pages 297ff

Chapter 63 is in the third section. In the *second* big section (chapters 40-55), there had been a rather promising message that God's God-ing will put everything right. The people will be delivered from their bondage to Babylon, they'll return home, able to rebuild their cities and their lives, confident once more in their identity as God's chosen people. Those words that G. F. Handel made so famous near the opening of *Messiah*, perfectly capture the mood of Second Isaiah:

'Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.  
Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her,  
that her warfare is accomplished,  
that her iniquity is pardoned.'<sup>7</sup>

It is going to be OK.

But some years later, we are in the third section of Isaiah (chapters 56-66). Something has gone wrong. The rebuilding of Temple and of community hasn't happened. There is bitter enmity between rival groups. The courts are corrupt, the religious leaders are pursuing personal gain, and the people are barely religious at all. There is not much comfort.

#### IV LOOK DOWN

From in the midst of this acute disappointment, the people of whom Third Isaiah is writing imagine God remotely enthroned in the safety of the heavens. Distant, forgetting them. As if with a heady mix of pleading, and irony, and sarcasm they cry out for God to 'look down'. They adopt language even more intimate than that of Psalm 23's sheep speaking of their shepherd. They refer to God now as their *Father*. They seem to be saying, 'From your glory look down upon us in our gloom! Regard us with compassion! Have mercy!' They may have become apathetic, even disobedient and disloyal, but now their circumstances stir in them a new piety - a new sense of their need of the One they for too long have spurned. In our own gloomy era, might we find ourselves this Advent pleading with God to 'look down' on us and even more on places of such acute suffering with the eyes of a solicitous parent looking on their child as they see them choosing unwisely and making mistakes?

#### V COME DOWN

And then, from just a few verses later, Penny read lines of Chapter 64. More than *looking* down, the prophet articulates the people's growing despair, as he cries, '*come* down'. Maybe it's another version of our opening words today, 'drop down, O heavens, rain down righteousness'.<sup>8</sup> There's an even greater intensity here. Identifying with the people, Isaiah writes of their pleading to this father figure. We're nothing without your mercy, compassion and forgiveness. Our world is not as it should be. Our relationships are fractured and febrile. Shower upon us something to put things right. Like a potter works miracles with clay, come, remould us into what would have us be: treat us, not as creatures with whom you're angry, but as parents treat their children. The Christmas narrative entails this 'coming down', so richly expressed by John Donne:

'Immensity ... now leaves his well-belov'd imprisonment.  
There he hath made himself to his intent  
Weak enough, now into our world to come.'<sup>9</sup>

In 2023, is it not a similar longing for God to come down that leads us to intone so passionately, 'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel'?

#### VI PUT DOWN

Look down, come down. These two imperatives of trustful longing then pointed me to Mary. The Angel Gabriel all but arrests her as she is plucked from innocence and naivete to have that 'immensity, cloister'd in [her] dear womb',<sup>10</sup> becoming the Mother of the Lord. But it's not just

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<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 40.1f, as in *Messiah* (HWV 56 1741), by G. F. Handel 1685-1759, with text adapted from scripture by Charles Jennes 1700-1773

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 45.8 - *Rorate caeli desuper et nubes pluant iustum* in the Latin Vulgate

<sup>9</sup> Donne, John in *Nativity*, number 3 from *La Corona*, lines 1-4

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, line 1

that her own life is somehow turned in 180 degrees from what she expected as a rural bride-to-be. St Luke also puts into her mouth the most radical of poems about her son's impact. *Magnificat* tells of how, as his mother, she is the instrument of God's programme for what some call turning the world upside down, but which others intuit is actually turning it 'the right way up'. As an element of that, she proclaims that the mighty are 'put down' from their seats.<sup>11</sup> And that's why we must be careful what we ask for. If with Isaiah's contemporaries, we ask for God to 'look down' or even to 'come down', or if we sing with Advent ardour, 'O come, O come Emmanuel', it is going to make a difference. Metaphorically, it will bring us face-to-face to God, it will try to realign us to God's way, and that will not leave us where it finds us. When Luke tells us that Mary has a vision of those who exercise abuse power being 'put down' he uses a word that can mean things like 'destroying arguments'.<sup>12</sup> In public discourse today there are some profoundly divergent philosophies that lead to some dramatically varying priorities for how we treat one another. It's as if our era is just like that of the third section of Isaiah, with its corruption, enmity and self-interest winning the day. And Mary senses God intending to use Jesus to destroy those arguments, re-set all that – to re-frame our arguments, to re-define our logic, to re-orientate our direction of travel until we're the right way up.

## VII CALM DOWN

And finally, could it be that this Advent's putting down the mighty, those who distort and destroy community, is in order that we and our contemporaries might 'calm down'? I wonder if you cherish Psalm 46 as I do, with its confident assertion that God is our refuge and our strength.<sup>13</sup> That feels like just what we need. And do you like its closing idea, 'Be still and know that I am God'? Does it assure us that it's all alright really, and if we still ourselves, peace will return? Well, if you do like that, then you and me both. But the calming down promised by God's coming down in Jesus and putting down of the mighty from their seat is about more than just being still. We might read the Hebrew for 'be still' as urging that we 'loosen our grip' – it suggests 'letting go and letting God', as the old saying has it. And that, too, is part of what Advent implies. Asking God to look down, inviting God to come down in Jesus, praying that God puts down the mighty, is in order that we might so loose our grip that we can be 'calmed down' by God's peace being given space in our lives and in our world. And I value that thought, too. Whether one is looking at how extremist politics is winning support in various countries across the world, or at the places where there is resort to hideously cruel violence, or at how our bothered and bewildered frame of mind can raise the temperature in meetings we attend or of the emails we exchange, calming down will enable us to entertain the Advent hope, as we let God be God, as God is in Jesus..

## VIII CONCLUSION

*Look down* from heaven and see,  
*come down* so that the mountains quake at your presence,  
*put down* the mighty from their seat,  
*calm us down* that we might know you are God.  
That is Advent.  
Let's wake up to it.

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3<sup>rd</sup> December 2023

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<sup>11</sup> Luke 1.52

<sup>12</sup> see II Corinthians 10.4f

<sup>13</sup> Psalm 46.1