



**Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on Sunday 29 November 2020, Advent Sunday.**

**Readings: Isaiah 64.1-9; I Corinthians 1.3-9; Mark 13.32-37**

I loved my maternal grandmother, the only one of my grandparents who lived beyond my toddler years. She lived ten miles from our childhood home and came for lunch every other Sunday, going to her elder daughter on the weeks in between. And I have some treasured memories of those fortnightly visits. I never doubted that she loved us, but I was at my happiest when she was actually with us – a gravelly voice following thyroid surgery, a warm smile, and an utterly dependable love. We called her Soapy because of how enthusiastically she bathed us when we were little.

Of all the big Christian ideas, the one that has always most arrested my attention and satisfied my longings is incarnation. I gain untold encouragement for life in its basic notion that God meets us where we are; that in those exquisite narratives of a baby born in Bethlehem we find a God who has come to dwell among us. Whatismore, as incarnation thinking goes, Jesus is not merely ‘God for us’, precious though that is, but much more crucially, ‘God with us’. You can be ‘for’ something from a distance, but almost by definition, objectivity does not imply intimacy. What really makes a difference is to be ‘with’ something. For me, this ‘for’ and ‘with’ language sums up why I so looked forward to every other weekend when Nanny came to be with us. Perhaps it is even more profoundly expressed in the thought that it’s one thing to *cook for* the homeless, but quite another to sit down and *eat with* them.

If we scale the heights of God-talk in this incarnational truth - that God meets us where we are - then it seems to me that a sermon must also meet us where we are. Sermons must emerge from our lived realities. So, where are we this Advent Sunday 2020?

Well, most obviously, we are in a lockdown because of the coronavirus Covid-19. There are limitations upon where we can go and with whom we can be. By extension we are in a gathering economic situation from which it will take years to recover. Whilst some are inconvenienced by all of this, too many are in real hardship. There are immediate and longer-term implications for mental health.

Only slightly hidden by the immediacy of the pandemic, there are other issues like the ecological crisis, injustice and a political climate. And then some of us might be in the middle of challenging times personally: health, livelihood or relationships under strain. How can a sermon worthy of the name start anywhere else?

The sixty-fourth chapter of Isaiah doesn’t. ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down’ is a cry that we might hear today. The fact that Isaiah was not speaking in times identical to ours, doesn’t reduce the relevance of his cry. There’s religious apathy - the people have turned from God, and fear that God has turned from them. There’s political turmoil - a threat from the surrounding nations. And Isaiah seems to be

expressing the mood of the day: ‘Where are you?’ And he says more than *look* down; this is the plea for God to act decisively: ‘*come* down’.

Immediately, though, he reminds the people of God’s relationship to them. His imagery is powerful – they are like children to a father, clay to a potter. These are not just the images of ‘for us’, but ‘with us’. How could God be more intimate with us than potters are to their clay? – gently, tenderly, ever so carefully making a thing of beauty, or a vessel of usefulness. Such is the God of the covenant. Isaiah recognises God’s disappointment – surely, it’s part of being in covenant, to be disappointed when the other party breaks it? Yet Isaiah also knows God’s capacity for mercy – do not be exceedingly angry, treat us as your people.

In these unfamiliar Covid times, I’m grateful for a word like Isaiah’s, speaking as if directly to us.

But Elaine also read to us from Mark’s Gospel. Just as the church’s year starts afresh on Advent Sunday, so we now turn to a new section of the three-year Lectionary. For twelve months, the Gospel readings have largely been from Matthew. From today until next Advent Sunday, there will be a focus upon Mark. Thought to be the first of the four Gospels to be completed, it opens differently from all of the other three. Each in their own ways, Matthew, Luke and John tell us of how God came to be ‘with us’ – Matthew, within the first chapter, using the name ‘Emmanuel, which means “God is with us”’; Luke narrating Gabriel’s message to Mary, the birth of Jesus whom she wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, and the visitors from the fields; John more philosophically writing of the Word becoming flesh that is full of grace and truth.

Mark has none of that. Perhaps, writing earlier than the others, he assumes those nativity tales are known. Rather, he is straight in with what he calls ‘the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ the Son of God.’ It’s a book of teaching more than it is a tool for evangelism or apologetics. Mark offers us help for living out the Christian faith where we are.

In chapter 13, he writes about the state of the world at that time. It was the era around AD 66-70, when the temple was destroyed. If we’d started earlier in chapter 13, we’d have heard Jesus giving warnings about that, and about wars and persecution, about family disintegration, about famine and earthquakes. Sound familiar? Well, yes, of course. This is the stuff of human history. We’ve read of it. We’re living through it. It’s not unique to the first century, any more than what we are living through is unique to *our* time - the Spanish flu of a century ago ought to assure us of that. In the same way that Mark does not depict Jesus as trying to tell people that the end is near just because of what is going on around them, so we, too, ought not to make any such naïve or fanciful claims, as if we know today is the beginning of our end. As some authorities put it, Mark 13 is not prophecy of exactly what will happen. It is warning. The God who came in Jesus will come again, and bring all things to completion. We do not know when or how, but we should always live in readiness. Be watchful; keep awake. And let part of our watchfulness be living in the knowledge that in Christ, God is with us.

Epistle writers, like ancient prophets and early evangelists, were also speaking to people by taking seriously their situation. So, writing to the church in Corinth, Paul affirms the way they are waiting for what he calls ‘the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Like us, the Corinthians, lived through ‘in between time.’ God has come in Christ; we await the consummation of all he began. He reassures them that they have what they need to be careful waiters, however long the wait is. And so do we. God has not abandoned us. As we wait, we live through similar times to those Mark narrates. They call to us to live out our faith in transformative ways. Faithful people in these in between times do not surrender to despair; we live in hope that trusts we are in God’s hands – nail marked with an inviolate covenant as those hands are. Nor do faithful people today give in to apathy; we live out God’s love, for the healing of the nations and the blessing of the suffering. And nor, during these in between times, before God’s purpose is finally fulfilled, do faithful people turn their backs on God; we worship God because God is God; we pray to God because that is what opens us to God’s with-us-ness; and we serve God’s mission, pursuing God’s reign which is here, and yet is still to come.

So this Advent, as much as any before it, we celebrate the God who is with us, until either we go to be with God, or God comes to reign with us.

The music for reflection is an evocative echo of Isaiah’s plea, which maybe is ours, too, as the Advent Prose with which our service began stirs within us: *‘Drop down, ye heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness.*