

## St. Mary's Holy Communion Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> December 2016

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent

**Isaiah 11:1-10    Romans 15:4-13    Matthew 3:1-12**

last week Anna introduced us to the idea of Advent, as a time of *waiting*, that has a triple focus – in the past, present and future: on the past birth of Christ, on his future Second Coming, and on our present need for Jesus to be ‘born in us’ each day;

[all this year's Advent sermons will be posted on the website]

at the same time, a number of us have started reading these daily devotions for Advent by Ann Garrido, ‘The Living Gospel’, and I was particularly struck by these words from her introduction, which also set a good pattern for this season:

‘God has a dream for our planet, and it is no small matter. God imagines our earth as a place where life flourishes: a place of justice for all peoples and a place of harmony for all creation. In God's dream, those who are blind are given sight, the deaf are able to hear, and those who are bound are set free. The hungry are satisfied. The outcasts are welcomed. There are no obstacles to enjoying true communion with one another.’

‘The prophets illustrated this dream for us in riches images – of mountaintop banquets and wolves dining alongside lambs [as in today's passage from Isaiah 11]. Jesus gave this dream a name, “the kingdom of God”.’

‘We have not yet experienced this kingdom in its fullness. The earth that we know continues to struggle with violence and war, injustice and hunger. And so each year – in the darkest time of the year – the church marks the season of Advent as *a time to nourish hope*.’

I love that last phrase – that this Advent season is *a time to nourish hope*; are we hopeful people? what our hope rest on? the same theme of hope is touched on in Bishop Steven's [the Bishop of Oxford] recent letter to all clergy in Oxford Diocese, where he writes this:

‘Greetings at the beginning of this Advent season when the church focusses her life on hope in God, *that most slender and vital Christian virtue*.’

‘In Advent we read together the book of Isaiah – a book written against a background of immense suffering and difficulty. But in almost every chapter there are flashes of hope and promises of joy. The world will not always be as it is. There is a better vision. The servant of God, the Saviour, will come.’

‘There is a pressing need to proclaim this Advent hope as 2016 draws to its close. The world has been shaken this year. Britain, Europe and America face a more uncertain future. As a church we need to set out clearly the Christian hope, God's vision for the world and for human flourishing.’

the hope of God's vision, of God's kingdom, of God's dream (I like that idea) – that is what we are called to live in, to wait upon, and to make known during Advent

this theme of hope comes through strongly in today's verses from Romans 15: Paul writes that by the encouragement of the scriptures we are to have hope; and that the Gentiles are to share in the hope foretold by Isaiah through the ‘root of Jesse’; and he prays that ‘the

God of hope may fill us with all joy and peace in believing, that we might abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit'

this word, 'hope', is often used in rather a feeble way; we hope for fine weather or a safe journey or better health or good exam results; it's no more than a vague expression of our desire for something favourable in the future; it is not a hope that has any particular foundation to it

by contrast the hope that Paul speaks of, and that the prophets like Isaiah point towards, our Advent hope, does have a foundation, in the past, present and future: in the past actions and faithfulness of God, and in the present work of his Holy Spirit, and the future promises that have begun their fulfilment in Christ

this hope is rooted in reality, in a clear-eyed perception of where we are now; true hope is not just wishful thinking; it has to begin with seeing our condition with honesty, and accepting its consequences; only then it can look beyond that reality to the possibility of change and renewal

Isaiah, for example, sees the threat to his country from outside forces, and recognises it as God's judgement on his people for their sin and unfaithfulness; this ideal king, the 'shoot from the stump of Jesse', the one on whom the spirit of the Lord will rest, is also the one who will 'judge the poor with righteousness' and who will 'strike the earth with the rod of his mouth'

it is only when Isaiah's people face reality – and judgement – that they can begin to see beyond to the hope of the kingdom, to a place and time when 'they will not hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain'

John the Baptist will get more attention next week, but in today's passage from Matthew 3 we see him standing in the same prophetic tradition as Isaiah; he even has the rough clothes and wild-food diet to match; the people flock from all around, for they recognise the true prophetic voice that has not been heard in Israel for hundreds of years

and John responds in traditional prophetic style, with a thundering denunciation of this 'brood of vipers,' who are hoping to 'flee from the wrath to come'; (not an approach I generally take with those coming for baptism!)

again, this is what is needed: a clear statement of the reality of their situation: their hypocrisy and complacency – they're 'God's people, children of Abraham', but they've failed to 'bear fruit worthy of repentance', and so God's judgement is on them: 'even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire'

only then can hope break through, of the one to come after John, who will 'baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire'

what sins would John the Baptist point to in our time? what are the things for which we need to repent and accept God's judgement?

perhaps the plight of the poor, homeless, cold and hungry on our own streets – while surrounded by so much overindulgence and wastefulness in our society? that is shocking!

or what about the racism and tribalism, the narrow-minded selfishness of our political system, exposed so brutally in the Brexit campaign?

or, as I mentioned at the start, with the prayer at the lighting of the Advent candles, there is the issue of *gender-based violence*, something that is as pressing as ever today, all around the world; we are approaching the end of 16 Days Of Activism around this issue, focussed on the pledge ‘never to commit, condone or remain silent about men’s violence against women in all its forms’; sadly, even relatively wealthy countries like ours, and even Christian churches, are not immune from this scandal; that’s a hard reality to face but when we acknowledge these things, and repent of them, then we can begin to hope again, with a hope founded on the goodness, grace and redeeming power of God

last week Anna spoke of the ‘circular’ nature of time as we experience it, the returning to the same point, as we do each year – Advent, again, Christmas, again! does anything change? can anything get better?

but we are on more of a helix, advancing slowly perhaps, but each year in a slightly different place, from which we can see things a little differently and therefore act differently

how can we participate in the coming of Christ’s kingdom this Advent? how can we share in generating, sustaining, and proclaiming hope for the fulfilment of God’s dream?

I will end with words from Paula Gooder’s Advent book, that Anna quoted from last week; after all that has been said about past, present and future waiting, she writes:

‘most of all, Advent summons us to the present moment, to a still, yet active, a tranquil yet steadfast commitment to the life we live now; it invites us to make real in the *present* a little of that glorious *future* held open to us by the *past* birth, death and resurrection of Jesus’

May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, that we might abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.