

Sermon for Sunday 6th December 2020, Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8
2nd Sunday in Advent, by Canon Tom Buchanan

“Comfort. Comfort my people says your God”.

I think it's fair to say that this year we are experiencing the strangest Advent of our lifetimes. Nothing is normal. Many of the things we took completely for granted have been taken away from us. We are in a period of national waiting. Holding onto the promise that one day soon we will be back to normal, that sunshine and hugs and family visits and simple pleasures like eating together will return.

But for now we wait.

I think Advent is supposed to be strange. We lose track of this strangeness in a normal year. Amidst all that “Xmas” has become, with the schmaltz of piped carols in John Lewis, and gingerbread lattes, and television adverts, and Christmas jumpers and office parties, and “Here it is Merry Christmas” and “is it too early to open the Quality Street?” and literally limitless easy peelers, we lose sight of the extraordinary tension that Advent embodies. The season of waiting has come and it's supposed to be uncomfortable.

The people in the tiny kingdom of Judea, Isaiah's contemporaries, living as they were dwarfed by their aggressive neighbours, under constant threat of being overtaken, consumed, by the might of the Assyrian empire, were in a period of waiting too. The sense of fear must have been palpable. Always looking over their shoulders, always waiting for the Assyrians to strike, decades spent on alert, waiting for the moment when Jerusalem would finally be engulfed, weary of decades of economic hardship. The Chapter we heard in Isaiah marks the turning point in this amazing book. In the first 39 Chapters we see Isaiah constantly challenging God's people, challenging them to repent, to turn back to God, to cleanse their corrupt hearts.... and we see the people constantly ignoring him. At the end of this first section, we see Isaiah foretell that the kingdom of Judah would indeed be engulfed, but not by the Assyrians as everyone was expecting, but by the Babylonians.

From Chapter 40 onwards, and from today's reading onwards we see a completely different message coming from Isaiah. One of comfort, one of hope for the future, an encouragement to them that despite what was to come, that one day God would restore his people to their homeland, to Zion. An encouragement that said that the tribes of Israel were still God's people, that their sins had been paid for, and that the glory of the Lord would one day be revealed to them again, and that he would gather his people, as a shepherd gathers his flocks, and bring them home at last to Zion.

It's a wonderful picture of hope isn't? I can imagine the people we see in Psalm 137 who sat down and wept as they remembered Zion holding onto the promises that Isaiah gave them. “Wait for the Lord” as the Psalmist says. “Keep strong, take heart and wait for the Lord.”

I think November is a horrible month spiritually – beginning with the gloom of Halloween, then moving swiftly on to burning effigies of our fellow Englishmen on bonfires, then the hour changes, and the days seem to shorten very rapidly. It's cold and damp and mournful, culminating as it does in the incomprehensible sadness and poignancy of armistice day and the unspeakable horrors that day forces us to remember. Yet as soon as December arrives, the whole mood changes. The pilot light sputters into life.....and the gloom begins, imperceptibly at first, to dispel. We see the first flickers of the Light of the World on the horizon. Our eyes begin to focus in the far distance on the stable, on the Messiah, on the promises contained in the scriptures and how they will be fulfilled and re-fulfilled in three weeks' time. The promise that God is coming. Is coming as a helpless child.

Advent is, of course, a time of tension. We wait patiently, expectantly, for Christ's coming, yet we journey spiritually towards the Messiah's birth that has already happened. We look forward to Christ's second coming as we look back to his first coming two thousand years ago. Looking backwards we place God in space and time. God became man and lived among us and we can date this pretty accurately using mentions by both Jewish and Roman historians. The word became flesh and blood. We place God's coming into history, and into the context of his crucifixion and resurrection too. For you can't anticipate Christmas without looking further to Easter.

But looking forwards we have none of the framework. The bible only hints at what is going to happen next time. And in a world that is used to certainty, We don't know when he's coming back. We don't know how he's coming back. As a helpless baby again, or fully grown and fully glorious, raising up valleys and levelling mountains such is his power? This lack of certainty makes us uncomfortable. The wait is surely longer than the early Christians were anticipating. But we must continue to wait patiently, gazing into the unknown. Holding onto those first lights of the advent candles, to give us hope, to give us certainty, that he is coming back.

Given the state of the World we inhabit, and the year we've had it is sometimes hard to imagine that The Prince of Peace will ever come to proclaim peace to the Nations. The leader of the free world and defender of democracy is dragging his feet over the handover of power in the most powerful nation in the world. In China, over a million Uyghur muslims have been or are being "reeducated" in concentration camps to knock their faith out of them. The situations in Syria, in Yemen, in Azerbaijan, in Ethiopia - the list goes on - make it harder than ever for us to imagine that the Christ could ever be coming back. Year after year, the suffering of our fellow Christians brothers and sisters in countries across the world seems to belie any movement in the right direction. The movement of refugees across borders, across treacherous swathes of sea and the rise of far right wing politics in response to this speaks to a fundamental unease, an imbalance, in a world that God created to be perfect. We live in a country of unparalleled wealth. With a large number of people who have to exist by going to the foodbank. A significant number of British children live below the poverty line. And it's all

getting worse isn't it? And it's possible to lose sight of the promise that our Messiah will return amidst all the suffering we see around us. It hardly feels like God's world is being readied for his return in glory to reestablish once and for all his kingdom.

But our faith, and the prompting of the Holy Spirit allows us to proclaim once more this Advent that he WILL come. He will come. He may even choose to come in our lifetimes. He may even choose to come this year. He might have been born already. Yes Advent is a time of waiting, but it is a time of waiting in hope, in faith, in the promise that what is prophesied will happen.

It strikes me that unless I am careful it is too easy for me to see Advent - especially in normal years - as a corporate exercise. A sort of group movement towards the stable. The body of Christ in "group waiting mode". That we, as a church in Advent, turn our eyes to the Messiah is undoubtedly true, but there is a risk that as individuals we are carried along through Advent, marking the Sundays, lighting the candles, opening the windows on the calendar, going through the motions as a sort of historical re-enactment without personalising the process....we cycle through Advent as not much more than a period in the Church calendar that happens every year, year on year. A time, in normal years certainly, that is chock full of stress and near rising panic over presents, and Tesco's delivery slots, and Amazon prime, and where's the sellotape.....but it's different this year.

Perhaps the one positive of this strange time we're living in is that we can understand the reality of waiting, the reality of fear yes, but a fear that begins to be overtaken by hope, the reality of a future that promises to be infinitely better than the present. The realising of that first flicker of light on the horizon as embodied by the creation of vaccines that are real and viable and in production.

This makes Advent real for me in a way that it has seldom been real before. And while much if not most of 2020 should be forgotten, this new way of looking at Advent will be remembered.

Traditionally, of course, Advent is a time of fasting, just like Lent. Of introspection. Of listening out for the voice of John the Baptist in the desert calling us to repentance and preparation for the Messiah's arrival. Of recognition that the whole of Jesus' story puts into sharp relief that none of us is worthy to encounter the reality of what Jesus did for us all. God became flesh and lived among us. That is the greatest of all miracles. That's the thread of hope that we must fight against losing in the anxiety and the stress of Advent 2020. Jesus is coming. And John is calling us to look out for him.

I found myself wondering what Mary must have been feeling at this stage in the story. Mary, carrying a child that she knew was God's. Mary, waiting. Waiting for it all to start. What was she thinking, eight months in, all large and uncomfortable and short of sleep and dreading the birth and everything else that you normally feel in the last four weeks. I can't imagine she was excited or relaxed. This baby, announced to her by an angel. This baby, conceived to a virgin, to an unmarried woman, Just as the angel had promised. I imagine she was terrified. What

power did this child moving inside her hold? What was her son, God's son, going to do? She would have been familiar with the prophecies of Isaiah - did she doubt that the glory of the Lord would be revealed in her son? We too need to have that same sense of fear at the awesome power of what is to come. Not fear of the unknown as such. Not scared of the dark, but scared of the light and what it could mean. Scared of a God the thongs of whose sandals John the Baptist isn't worthy to untie.

Yes, Advent is a time of waiting for Emmanuel to ransom his captive people, but it is also a time to acknowledge that he has ransomed me personally, and will restore me, the least deserving, to his kingdom when he comes again. I have no doubt about this because the scriptures tell me that it is so. I carry fear that I have not lived up to his expectations for me, but I know, in this time of waiting, that I am, we are, part of his chosen people.

So for me this year, I will try and make advent a time of waiting, patiently, to revisit the miracle that is God's action in my life. To bask in God's light as it grows throughout the season and as it banishes my darkness. And at the end, when the presents are wrapped, the stockings are out, the smaller Turkey than normal is stuffed, and the brussels are peeled, to proclaim again freedom for every captive - including me.