



Advent Sunday

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



Sunday 29 November 2020

READINGS

Isaiah 64:-9; Psalm 80: 1-7,17-19; 1 Corinthians 1: 3-9; Mark 13: 24-37

God with us ... soon

Welcome to our online congregation, as we mark the beginning of the church's New Year, and we look forward to celebrating once again the coming of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We look forward in hope once again.

This has been a very different, peculiar year. It's been a year of fear of an unseen and initially largely unknown virus, frustration at the restrictions we have had to put up with and the people we couldn't visit, cautious hope at the development of a vaccine, despair at the loss of businesses and income, mourning for those who have died from it, and joy at the number of ways we have been in contact with people whom we haven't seen for ages, through the development on online meeting rooms which has opened up a new world for us all. Most of us have reached some form of resignation to our current way of life, but we are all tired, and when we read in today's gospel that we don't know when Christ will return, perhaps, with our waiting for the reality of a vaccine and the end of the age of Covid 19, for the first time in our lives, we can actually understand the waiting experience as hadn't been possible before. All this happens in a world where crisis has made underlying differences, such as race, politics, gender violence and the rest often spill over to become overt antagonisms, and criticism all the way to vitriol is spilt over every bit of communication, from expert analysis to social media comments.

So what exactly are we being prepared for, and what is expected of us? We look at our readings with our pandemic exhausted eyes, and oh, do we long for a God who will come and sort it all out. But all of our readings express the longings of people who are living in disturbing times. The Isaiah reading was written when the Jews had returned from exile and the issues of settling down with those who had been left behind, as well as pagan peoples who lived in the same area, were difficult. Added complications were the questions of religious and national exclusivity of Ezra and Nehemiah vs the inclusivity Isaiah seems to preach.

Paul is writing to a church which is part of a disturbing minority seen to be challenging the power of the Roman Empire, but its members were also fighting amongst themselves about what was acceptable, who they were following, and all the other conflicts that have bedevilled churches ever since. Here he is so grateful for those he can trust to keep the faith. There must have been many who let him down.

Jesus was warning those affected by Roman rule, but were also torn between the many factions whose normal religious arguments had become more acrid because of the political threats which hovered over everything. Very tense, violent times, but they promise Jesus will come again.

So those times were difficult too, and there was a longing for God to come and intervene, just as we have prayed for God to answer our many desperate prayers this year. And God did and does more than intervene. God didn't

just arrive; God became one of us – the incarnate Christ. If we get away from the repetitive voice of our religious education which over the years has blunted the edges of this wonder, it's really quite remarkable. Jesus came as God to be with us, and through the Holy Spirit, he has never really gone away. But if this incarnation is not to be wasted, we need to be prepared for his coming. What are these passages asking of us?

Firstly, we need to be aware of the fact that we belong to something much greater than ourselves. We can't hide away from the sin, the calamity and injustice of our world, but we need to be able to see that God is bigger than all of it and that nothing can frustrate God's purpose in the long run. We are all God's creation and God has a purpose for each one of us within what God has made, and our role is to bring about part of that fulfillment.

Secondly, God cares deeply for us and the answers to our prayers are always there. It sometimes takes very special people to uncover what God is doing, but often we need to open our eyes and see how God is using our current situation to make his purposes known to us. And just as Jesus was crucified for the sins of many, so the tragedies of our society, the abuse of the vulnerable, the victims of dishonesty, corruption and fraud, the deaths of those infected through the don't-care attitude of many – these are crucified as Jesus was, as a result of the sin of the world. If we learn from God, their tragedies will be the salvation of many who come after them. Their crucifixion, if it leads to repentance for our indifference, then renewed action on our part could mean the resurrection of a new South Africa, the kingdom of heaven in this place. As we are asked to "Watch" for the second coming of Christ, so we watch for where the Holy Spirit wants to work in the here and now, and make sure nothing we do hinders that, and everything we do makes God's love infinitely manifest.

Thirdly, God respects us as brothers and sisters, and as friends. God makes known God's displeasure at what we do, but we stand or fall by the consequences of our sin. Break any moral code, and we are in the long run, the losers and God mourns. The prophets said this over and over again. God does not break God's own laws, be they the laws of science, social sciences or just plain morality. Those laws are for our benefit, but we often abuse them and use them for our own pleasure and power seeking. The more power and influence we have, the more people will suffer from our sin, and the sooner our society will crumble into the dust of yet another third world failure.

Our parents and Sunday School teachers planted the word of God in our hearts, and the Holy Spirit works in our minds and our souls so that we are driven from **within** our own spirits, and not so much because we are afraid of punishment on earth and hell after death. In a truly mature Christianity, we are our **own** judges in the light of the truth of Christ. Ideally we will look at God's creation with the love of Christ that is within us, and we will hurt to see the totally unnecessary suffering of so many, and it will frustrate us to see, again and again, efforts at building a happy, holy kingdom are trashed by the selfish, destroyed by the deprived, and misunderstood by those so anaesthetized by their good life that, apart from the expensive cross around their necks on their posh clothing, their Christianity would not recognize the presence of God even if the crucifixion happened in their own back yard.

We are all children of this land, a land which has seen a lot of cruelty, war and suffering. Much that was good and generous in indigenous culture was belittled and trashed by those who came here and thought they were building a civilization. Much of the good that technology, administration and education brought here has been identified as foreign, oppressive and colonialist by those who are searching for a lost identity, and many are suffering as a result. We all belong to the God who created every one of us. Our current troubles show us how much we need the concern and consideration of each of our fellow countrymen. We need to watch. Christ comes in through the goodness of everyone, and part of our watching is to see his appearance through those with a different culture, skin colour, historical background, languages and philosophy. If we can see that, then we have a chance to make the God-given gifts which all people of Africa, both ethnic and immigrant, available to all the people living here, and we can all truly spread its God-given message of forgiveness, tolerance, generosity, hope, creativity and very hard work, to a tired world which doesn't have the answers any more.

Plagues are not new. In 165 AD a 15 year plague reduced the population of Europe and the Middle east by about a third. In 251 AD, another plague spread and included North Africa. Throughout both, the Christians did not run away, but cared for the victims looking after themselves and their non-Christian neighbours. Simple nursing acts such giving food and water to sick people ensured two thirds reduction in mortality of those associated with Christianity and for the first time, people began to see Christians as more than politically irritating people with funny beliefs. Now - what actually was the role of the church during Covid19? Have we as a community done anything significant to show the love of God to our society? Is our relative inaction not something we need to repent of this Advent?

This year, when we come to kneel again at the manger in Bethlehem (social distancing notwithstanding), we will make sure our hearts are cleansed and opened to receive all that God longs to give us. May we watch, and wait, and be ready. Jesus has come, he is with us, and in the end, we will see him face to face, and will know that he has been part of us and our world for a very long time. May our eyes be opened and may we allow Christ to work through our lives to the lives of all.