



Revd Ro's Reflection on Advent Sunday

Isaiah 64. 1-9

Mark 13. 24-37

Today is Advent Sunday, all over the world Christians will be lighting the first candle on their Advent crown. I have explained the symbolism of the Advent crown and it is a beautiful tradition.

I loved the series Downton Abbey and was sorry when it ended. I was delighted when they made 'Downton Abbey the Movie' and have just watched it, (again!) It is a feel good film but none the worse for that. It deals with the visit of King George and Queen Mary to Downton. Of course everything is cleaned and preparations go on and on. The only thing they don't do is paint it as the King and Queen are tired of the smell of new paint! If our Queen was to visit your house imagine the preparation. Advent, as I have said, is a time of preparation. I guess the question is just what preparation do we do for the coming of King Jesus as Immanuel, God with us at Christmas and indeed for his second coming which has been the topic of our readings for the last few weeks.

There is a powerful poem by Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, the 'Woodbine Willie' of the trenches. The poem contains the line 'When Jesus came to Birmingham they simply passed Him by.' It is a study of indifference to Jesus and his teachings and a warning against it.

The readings today contain stark warnings. During Advent we have readings from the prophet Isaiah. The writings of Isaiah stretch over a long period. But they span a most important epoch in the history of the Jewish people – the Exile. The days of the great King David, who united his people and built a great empire, have gone. His son Solomon had built the temple and beautified Jerusalem. Following Solomon's death civil wars followed, the kingdom was divided in two. Kings turned from God and worshiped idols and the people with them. The prophets warned of impending doom. First the Assyrians overran the land and next the Babylonians. They overran Jerusalem in BC 546 and destroyed the Temple. Zedekiah the king was taken into slavery and most of the people with him. Only a few poor people were left in the city. We can only imagine the desolation and pain felt by the people. The Temple, the very presence of God, had been destroyed. If we read Psalm 137 which begins, 'By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion...⁴How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?'

We get some idea of the utter desolation of a people who have lost everything. The second part of Isaiah spans the exile and our reading from the third part is post exilic.

God is the God of the covenant who loves his people, time and time again though, they have turned from him. This passage talks of the sins of the people.

⁷'There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity'

Isaiah laments the destruction of the Temple in the verses following the reading,

¹⁰ 'Your holy cities have become a wilderness; Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. ¹¹Our holy and beautiful house, where our ancestors praised you, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins. '

The plea in this passage is for forgiveness, for God to turn to his people in love and to restore them. The image of the potter is beautiful.

⁸'Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. ⁹Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.'

God's people are held in the palm of his hand and he, in love, will restore them, however they must keep their faith towards him and turn to him once more.

Once allowed to return to Jerusalem by Cyrus, the people rebuilt the Temple. The scriptures as we know them were collected and formalised. The heart had been ripped from the nation and they sought to restore it. The only way to do that is to turn from the old ways and turn to God.

Isaiah foretells of the saviour who will come to govern the world with justice and mercy.

⁶'For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷ His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace'

For us this is the Messiah, Jesus. God, the loving Father will rescue and restore his people. He will hold them safely in the palm of his hand but they must turn to him and keep his commandments. They must turn to him and turn from the old ways. It is similar to our baptismal promise.' I turn from sin and turn to Christ. This is the warning that is given by Jesus too.

The gospel reading is apocalyptic and at one level it illustrates in graphic terms the coming of the Son of Man to judge the earth at the establishment of God's kingdom. We have seen how Jesus and St. Paul have dealt with this in symbolic terms. We have looked at parables such as the bridesmaids who lost their chance of being included in the wedding feast because they were unprepared.

The message is quite simply 'Keep awake for you do not know when the master of the house will come.' Each day we pray, 'Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.' We look forward to the rule of Jesus at God's new creation, though we do not know how this will happen or when it will be. Jesus says at verse 32 'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.' The warning to be prepared is just as important for us as it was for Jesus' own generation. Our behaviour must be in line with the teachings of Jesus and the Christianity we profess. So our focus must be on living according to God's word and being instruments of his new creation.

It is very important that we see this passage in context. At the end of chapter 12 Jesus has once again delivered a scathing attack on the religious leaders.

The Jews longed for the coming of God's new creation when justice would reign on earth and the Messiah would be ruler and judge over all. The trouble was that the vast majority of them, particularly the religious leaders, did not recognise Jesus as the Messiah among them, Jesus. In verse 12 it says,

³⁸ 'As he taught, he said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! ⁴⁰They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'

What is happening in this section of Mark's gospel is that Jesus is warning against hypocrisy. These are the people who should be teaching the people about God and living as an example of God's teaching in fact doing anything but. He contrasts this behaviour with that of the poor widow.

'Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'

The contrast between her behaviour and the Pharisees is stark. This woman is so sincere in her love of God she gives everything. That is Jesus' message in a nutshell.

Now we have the link to the reading from Isaiah. The land has been conquered once again this time by the Romans and the Temple will be destroyed once more this time never to be restored.

At the beginning of Chapter 13 we have these words, 'As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' ²Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

As we read this passage we need to do so in the light of this prophecy and we also must remember when Mark's gospel was being written. Mark's gospel was written in AD 70. This date has a huge significance; it is the date of the destruction of the Temple. From AD 66 various Judean factions had controlled Jerusalem. In AD 70 the Roman set siege to the city. A siege which lasted about five months, then legions attacked the city and laid waste to it, the Temple, was destroyed. The suffering was unimaginable.

These events would have seemed like the end of everything to the Jews. The Temple was all in all them, it was indeed God's presence with them. If we read this passage, keeping these events in mind we can understand Jesus' words. The focus then is, in part, this destruction of the Temple, the city and Jewish worship.

However, Jesus is addressing his followers, his disciples, the ones from whom his church will grow. They will face persecution; his followers will see dreadful things like the destruction of the Temple and the city. But Jesus has made it clear; Temple worship was the old way. Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus is God. The focus now is on Jesus, not a building. Jesus is the presence of the living God. He is the Messiah; he must be the focus of worship

When Jesus addresses the Jews in the Temple after overturning the tables of the money changers he makes this clear, 'The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.' Jesus is God's presence with humanity. His body, the temple is destroyed but it will be restored gloriously at the resurrection. He gave his life as the final sacrifice and by his death and resurrection he won eternal life for us all.

Jesus says, just prior to the reading, ¹⁰ 'And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. ¹¹When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.' Jesus' first followers will take his message of love and salvation into the world, that will be tough and many will suffer but as he promises they will never be alone,

And we, the people of Jesus are in direct line from those first believers. Our commission is to take the love of Jesus into the world and like that poor widow give all we are to him. We too have the promise of Jesus that he is with us always.

Awful things do happen, if we had known last January what the world was to face this year we would have been terrified. But we know that God is with us and we see him working in those people, who in self-sacrificing love, have given their all to help humanity and combat this disease,

We know that God is a loving Father who will bring his reign of justice on the earth. We know that all who believe in him and do their best to obey his teaching will be co-heirs with Christ and inheritors of this kingdom.

In times of joy, in times of trouble we believe in the loving God who holds us in the palm of his hand.

'Mornings of joy give to ev'nings of tearfulness, trust for our trembling and hope for our fear.'

John Samuel Bewley Monsell

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