

SERMON for Advent 2 - December 8th, 2019.

Readings: Isaiah 11: 1-10; Psalm 72: 1-7, 18-21; Romans 15: 4-13 & Matthew 3: 1-12.

Start with 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord' from Godspell.

This morning's gospel reading always reminds me of the one 'West End' show I ever got to see – Godspell! This isn't quite the version I love and cherish but I have yet to work out the technicalities of downloading from an LP to today's recording devices! My version had a very young Jeremy Irons as the John the Baptist / Judas character and David Essex as Jesus!

Prepare the way of the Lord! Yes! I always felt that when I heard those words, I knew Christmas wasn't far away!

Our readings today are so much more positive than we have had in recent weeks. And yet, just because I find them 'more palatable' doesn't lessen the message or the challenge therein.

First, in our Old Testament reading, we hear from the prophet Isaiah. This part of Isaiah was probably written to a disheartened people in exile, trying to instil hope in them. The people of Judah had been carted off to Babylon, and they were devastated by the thought that they would never return to their homeland.

Isaiah talks about a time when a new king would be anointed, who would be descended from Jesse, the father of King David, and who, if you like, would be the perfect king and restore God's creation back to its intended perfection. It is a beautiful piece, a vision of paradise on earth, hope to a suffering people. ¹

I remember reading a commentary some years ago, about this Isaiah reading and its Advent context:

Isaiah's prophecy of the peaceful kingdom is front and centre in our collective consciousness at this time of the year. Everywhere we go, decorations, ornaments, carols and cards shout the words "Peace on Earth!"

At Advent, everyone, church and un-church alike, has been given a "free pass" to openly and boldly proclaim the dream of peace. The dream of peace is the single thread that connects us to every community, in every country, in every time and place throughout history. Peace is a core value of our human condition. In some parts of the world, peace would mean a ceasefire. In other places, peace might be a setting aside of personal differences. The lion and the lamb may take on different guises, but the vision remains one of peaceful co-existence.

As those who proclaim a faith in One we know as the Prince of Peace, our communities of faith play a key role in keeping the dream of God's peace alive. In a unique and glorious way, we are ambassadors of hope, protectors of promise, holy dreamers of the ultimate Dream." ²

"Hope" is one of those concepts which has always resonated deeply within me, to the point that at one stage I was collecting quotes about hope.

I don't know if any of you saw the *Lord of the Rings* movies, all those years ago? Since my teens, one of my enduring fictional heroes is Aragorn, he who would be king. There is a scene in the second film, *The Two Towers*, where Aragorn is standing on the ramparts before the battle of Helms Deep. The enemy in huge numbers is spread out before him and victory seems totally beyond them. His companion comments that there is no hope, and he turns and says, "There is always hope".

We are called to be hope bearers, hope bringers into this world which at times seems a place of darkness, a place where, for some, there is no hope.

In the Gospel reading, we hear the call of a second prophet - John the Baptist.

John was certainly a prophet, and in a way one could say he instilled hope in those who heard him, but his message was very different to Isaiah's.

John was the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy of "The voice crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord'... "

John came to prepare the way, prepare the people so that they may receive Jesus' teaching and example and bring in the Kingdom of Heaven – to bring in that vision of paradise that Isaiah spoke of in our first reading and today's psalmist echoes.

Unfortunately, as we know, the plan appears not to have worked so well.

Despite John's good efforts, despite Jesus' teaching and example, humankind then, and now, were not, nor are not ready to accept this vision of paradise, this Kingdom of God.

I came across a delightful piece which may go some way to illustrate why it probably still wouldn't work today.

We must remember not to sanitize Jesus.

In the time in which he lived, Jesus was scandalous, he was radical, in the view of the authorities of his time, Jesus was considered heretical and was thought to be downright rebellious.

The fact is, if Jesus were to return in the flesh, there isn't a Parish Council or Nomination Committee anywhere that would hire him as their next rector.

He dared to tamper with the social order...

He dared to confront the powers that be...

He dared to afflict the comfortable...

And... worst of all... he dared to tamper with their liturgy and to move the furniture around in the church. I'm afraid Church Office wouldn't know what to do with Jesus' profile and he probably wouldn't conform to the current *Safe Church* standards. They would probably suggest that he stay out of pastoral work and stick to teaching in the University. ¹

And yet, we hear John shouting in the desert: "Prepare the way of the Lord."

I think that most of the time we think John says, "Prepare the way FOR the Lord...."

But he doesn't.

He says "Prepare the way OF the Lord."

There is a huge difference. We are called to prepare ourselves to make the way of Jesus to be OUR way.

When Christmas comes, don't be fooled by that little innocent baby in a manger, because with that baby comes the Word of God, and that Word should shake our very foundations.

The season of Advent calls us to wake up out of our complacency. To reassess, to re-think who we are preparing ourselves to receive once more this Christmas, just who the baby in the manger is and what is expected of us.

A friend said that if you read the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and then go away feeling like you just enjoyed a soothing cup of warm chicken soup, you might want to read further!

There is something in John's message which comforts the disturbed and disturbs the comfortable. He offers hope and comfort to those who are struggling, that things will be better in the coming kingdom. But he gives those who are comfortable in their expectations a challenge not to rely on their social standing, success and earthly power.

The challenge for us is to reflect on what and who we are. Would we be discomfited by the return of Christ on earth?

John exhorts us to repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near ... that was 2000 years ago. It is near, but not yet.

The Baptist's call to prepare, the seeds Jesus, in his life and teaching planted in the world, have grown but are still not realised.

There is hope, there is always hope, and we are part of that hope

As we prepare ourselves for this Christmas, may we find a little time for self-examination and look at what it is within ourselves which stops the vision of God's peace being a reality.

As we prepare the Way of the Lord, let us not be accused of being a brood of vipers, but rather seekers. Seekers after peace, after hope, after Love or as my friend earlier said: we are ambassadors of hope, protectors of promise, holy dreamers of the ultimate Dream; so that:

"The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them."

May God's peace and hope fill your hearts this Advent and always. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley tssf
8 December 2019

REFERENCES:

1. Bill Adams in a sermon in 2001 posted on *gospeltalk*.
2. Susan Ivany – *New Life for dead Wood – comments for Advent 2* as posted on *midrash* in 2004.