

Sermon for 27th November 2022, Year A, Advent Sunday

Preached at St Michael Smarden and All Saints Biddenden

Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44

Sermon

Happy New Year! Or 'Happy New Church Year' to be precise. Advent Sunday is the day that begins once again the annual round of seasons and readings in the Church calendar. Having concluded the story of Jesus by focusing on his post-resurrection role as Christ the King, we now return to the beginning of the story, back to the time just before Jesus is born, and we enter this season of Advent, traditionally a period of penitential waiting for the Christ child to come into the world.

We may be tempted to think that we're outside this story, not really part of it. It's a story about other peoples long ago, and our role is simply to learn what lessons we may from this ancient wisdom and go about our very different, modern lives.

But as with most things in our faith, the story isn't quite as simple as that. It's not just a story about something that's in the past that we look back on and celebrate every year. Advent is not just a time of preparation for the annual re-enactment of the coming of baby Jesus, it's also a time for pondering the second coming of Jesus, the time when all things will be made well, when wars and dying and suffering and tears will cease.

The season of Advent is here to remind us that God's story isn't over, and we are all slap bang in the middle of it still. We, today, are waiting for the promises to be fulfilled, both the promises of Jesus to come again as king and judge, and the promises of Isaiah that 'nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more'.

We are as much involved in the story of God's relationship with humanity as anyone in Isaiah's time, hundreds of years before Jesus was born at Bethlehem, or even in Jesus's time, two thousand years ago.

Looking at the state of the world today, it's as clear as ever that Isaiah's prophecies have not yet been fulfilled. Nations and cultures and religions are still at war with one another. If anything, ploughshares and pruning hooks are being repurposed into swords and spears, rather than the other way around.

We are still waiting. Like the people of Isaiah's day, like the people of Jesus's day we are waiting and hoping for God to save us.

So, the vision that Isaiah offers is directed at us, not just at our iron age ancestors, and not even just at those alive in our New Testament stories when Jesus walked on the earth.

This vision of Isaiah's was obviously a popular one for the prophets – it appears word-for-word in the book of the prophet Micah as well as here in Isaiah. Perhaps it was like a hymn, something that they sang to each other in dark times, to keep their hope alive, their yearning for a different kind of world, in which all the nations and peoples sought God together, to learn his ways of peace and love and forgiveness and compassion, to walk together with common heart and mind. In this world, God will be present among his people. God will judge between the nations and arbitrate with justice and mercy. Inequities will be balanced, shackles will be loosed, wrongs will be set right, and no longer will there be any need for the evil curse of war and violence that destroys so many lives both then and now and every year between.

This transformational vision of a possible future is the inspiration for a large sculpture that stands outside the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York, depicting a man beating a sword into the shape of a plough.

Isaiah's prayer and prophecy is a cry of the human heart, and one we too are invited to take up and make our own, not as some faint echo of a time long past but as a full-throated roar of everything good and noble that our generation can muster.

"O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!" concludes the prophecy.

"O people of Biddenden & Smarden, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!"

We must acknowledge though that these inspirational words may also touch in us something rather raw and hurt and disillusioned. As much as we may long for wars to end and God to come again in person to rule over the earth with peace and justice, it is hard to believe that such a day will ever come – a good children's fable perhaps, but surely preposterous for adults to believe. We have been disappointed so many times by failed peace treaties, divisions within our own culture, fractured relationships in our own lives. What good could it do to raise up our hopes one more time? Better, surely, to leave Christmas in the realm of childhood wonder, where peace on earth and goodwill for all might still be believable.

But the truth is, it was exactly the same in the time of Isaiah, and it was exactly the same in the time of Jesus and his disciples. It was an impossible dream for them too, and many didn't believe it, and often only the prophets even dared to yearn for it – the prophets and perhaps those with a simple childlike faith who can resist the temptation to trust only in themselves and instead hold firm to their wonder, and to their God, asking simply, like Mary, "How can this be?"

The season of Advent proposes impossibilities. Bafflement is understandable. It sounds absurd. God himself becomes human and lives among us? How could it be that Christ might come again and war will be no more?

Advent means 'Come'. It is a simple expression of the depths of human longing. Come, Lord Jesus, Come, O God. Come into our messed up civilisations and for pity's sake save us.

But Advent is also a cry to one another: O people of Biddenden & Smarden, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!