

Sermon for 4th December 2022, Year A, Advent 2

Preached at All Saints Biddenden and St Michael Smarden

Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

Sermon

Sometimes when I stare at the lectionary readings set for the Sunday service, I feel like I am a prospector panning for gold. I know that there is something of immense value to uncover, but it often takes a fair amount of patience and waiting for God's inspiration while drinking copious cups of tea.

When we arrive in Advent, however, the situation is reversed. We are suddenly overwhelmed by all the most powerful imagery of past and future longing, and almost every sentence requires its own sermon in response. Today we're offered the prophet Isaiah, St Paul, and John the Baptist, all in full force, in some of the most evocative and powerful writing in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Isaiah is thought to have been writing around the time of the Assyrian invasion of the northern kingdom of Israel in the 8th century BC. We can read in the book of Kings that a prophet called Isaiah successfully persuaded King Ahaz of the southern kingdom of Judah to ignore the demands of his northern neighbours in Israel and Aram that Judah should join their rebellion against Assyria. What Isaiah probably didn't expect is that King Ahaz would not only refuse to join the rebellion but would call on Assyria itself to defend him from it, which they did by destroying Israel in 721 BC.

So much for the history lesson. It's all a bit 'Game of Thrones' from our perspective – what do we care of such ancient battles? – but it does give us some insight into why Isaiah might be longing for a new and righteous king who has the spirit of wisdom and understanding, and who will judge people with equity and side with the poor and meek of the earth, and yes, kill the wicked.

It's highly unlikely that Isaiah himself was really thinking about a Jesus Christ coming in over seven hundred years' time when these words were written. Prophets in those days were not foretellers of the far future, but 'forth-tellers' – those who spoke truth to power, who stood up for the powerless against the comfortable and hypocritical lifestyles of the rich and powerful.

This is why John the Baptist is often known as the last of the Old Testament prophets, even though he appears only in the New. He calls on the elite to repent. He stands at the margins and makes the high and mighty religious leaders come to him to see what he is saying, and then he attacks them – “You brood of vipers... Bear fruit worthy of repentance!”

And yet, from the earliest days of the Church, Christians have taken the words of Isaiah as having predicted – or at least described in advance – the sort of king that Jesus would be.

Paul the Apostle picks up Isaiah's reference to the longed-for righteous king coming out of the root or stump of Jesse. Jesse was King David's father of course, and so both are saying that despite the line of Kings from David having apparently weakened, become corrupt, or even died off, even so, God will bring new life from the apparently dead stump. Both Isaiah and Paul came to believe that the transformation from a culture of fear to a world at peace begins with just such a stump. Out of something that appears finished, lifeless, left behind by society, comes the sign of new life that embodies everything we long for.

We, like the early Christians, find ourselves living between two times, looking both forward and back. This is especially true in Advent. We celebrate and remember the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, the anointed descendent of King David, while also looking forward to the future promised kingdom of God that is in some sense both here now while also yet to be fully realised and experienced.

Isaiah describes this kingdom in terms of animals of every kind – both predator and prey – lying down together, no longer hurting each other. And the earth becomes full of the knowledge of the Lord, like the waters cover the sea.

The Hebrew word for knowledge apparently suggests not just the *intellectual* sort of knowledge, but also a full entering-into and experiencing of what is known. A full-immersion in God's love, so to speak. This is what Isaiah longed for, and also what Paul longed for, and perhaps also what we long for.

Paul, taking his cue from Isaiah, cries out to the Romans: "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God". Some bible translations want to translate 'welcome' as 'accept'. Accept one another, as Christ has accepted you. Be each other's friend, Paul is saying. Unconditionally include one another.

This kind of welcome is much more than greeting someone at the door, it's about a deep belonging and acceptance that has no interest in what anyone has done, achieved, merited, or failed to do. Don't we all long to meet people with whom we can really talk, who understand us, who listen carefully and hear even what is left unsaid, and then who accept us regardless of our faults? God in Jesus is the ultimate fulfilment of this longing, but we are also called to embody this for one another, because we too have the Spirit of God's love in our hearts, even if only a green shoot coming out of an old stump.

Paul says that this acceptance begins with Christ. Jesus made the first move. He accepted us therefore we can accept one another. I believe it's only when we truly experience ourselves as accepted and loved that we can begin to fully accept and love others. To be deprived of acceptance leads many to seek it desperately, by putting on an act, through intimidation, or by manipulation.

To see ourselves as accepted when we know what sort of person we have been, is truly an act of faith. We will never be good enough to be accepted by our own

efforts, or our qualities and talents. Even if we were, such a false self-image would inevitably, eventually, collapse. Instead, our acceptance must come from God. If I truly believe that God accepts me, then how can I not accept myself? I cannot be more demanding of myself than God, can I? And since I *am* accepted by God, how can I not then also accept everyone I meet?

This is the cry of Advent, and it is the cry of the Prophets, and the cry of Paul and the apostles. Even if all appears to be lost, and the hope of the kingdom of God seems far distant, the Spirit of God continually acts to bring forth new shoots of hope. God calls us again and again, to look on in wonder at the baby in the manger, bringing peace for all mankind, but also to realise that as we gaze on the Prince of Peace, that same peace, that same acceptance, is taking root in our hearts. We become that which we yearn for. In each of the pews beside us and behind and in front of us, people are longing to know that they too are loved, understood, and accepted. Is this not the kingdom of God, that even as our own heart is being transformed, we reveal God's love to each another?

There is a poem by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke that describes how a yearning for something far off nevertheless changes us in the here and now. It may convey something in a few words which I, with my thousand, cannot.

A Walk – Rainer Maria Rilke

My eyes already touch the sunny hill.
going far beyond the road I have begun,
So we are grasped by what we cannot grasp;
it has an inner light, even from a distance-
and changes us, even if we do not reach it,
into something else, which, hardly sensing it,
we already are; a gesture waves us on
answering our own wave...
but what we feel is the wind in our faces.