

Online Talk St Andrew's and All Saints

Sunday 29 November 2020

Advent: A Season of Hope

'Light in the Midst of Darkness'

Isaiah 9:1-7

Introduction – Turning Points

I wonder whether like me you've thought that the discovery of a vaccine for Covid19 has felt something like a turning point in the trajectory of world history? Here – at last – is a way forward out of a year of worldwide devastation, with its dark pall of sickness and death, economic deprivation and seemingly endless cycle of lockdown and social isolation?

Turning points affecting the whole of the planet at once don't happen all that often. Looking back on the twentieth century we might be able to name some, such as the assassination of an Austrian archduke that ushered in the first World War.

Sometimes they might be good news, like the discovery of penicillin, but frequently they are bad news – such as the release of the hydrogen bomb on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

After that, the world was never the same again.

From a Christian perspective, turning points are overruled by the hand of God, and ultimately under his providence.

And one of the most significant turning points in human history is the turning point that we prepare for in the season of Advent.

You see, of all the greatest moments in world history, the two events which are the greatest turning points are the incarnation and the resurrection.

The time when human beings turned away from God would be another turning point, but we don't have time to deal with that one today.

Easter is the most important turning point, because Jesus rising from the dead means that death no longer has a hold on us; eternal life is possible from this moment on.

Christmas is the second greatest turning point because God was born into this world in order to make Easter possible.

And Advent is the season that gives us permission to make time to get ready for the true meaning of Christmas time.

In the days when I used to teach teenagers, I remember that they would try to skip Advent altogether, and rush on to Christmas.

They'd try to lighten the mood of dark December days by saying, 'Come on, miss, it's Christmas!'

It was a hint that rather than beavering away on their maths, they would rather be on holiday, celebrating.

So I'd say to them, 'It's not Christmas, it's Advent', a remark that was guaranteed to floor them.

They'd heard of Advent of course, because whatever their faith background, or none, they all had their Advent calendars, but hardly any of them knew what Advent meant.

Waiting for time off was too much to bear. Isn't it Christmas already?

So if they asked, 'Advent, what's that?' I'd tell them that Advent means 'coming', from the Latin word, Adventus.

Christmas is coming. But it's not here yet.

Advent is the bridge time; a time to prepare for what is coming.

It takes us from where we are, to where we will soon be.

It's the beginning of a journey from a place of darkness to a future filled with light and hope.

It comes at a time of year when the days are shortening quickly, when light is at a premium.

It has its start in the darkest of days; when the gloom gathers so fiercely that it almost feels too much to bear.

And this year, with the virus still circulating, and some of us shut in for a lot of the time, the gloom is worse than ever.

And that's exactly where today's bible reading begins.

Isaiah chapter 9 comes in just as the end of the previous chapter talks about 'darkness' and 'fearful gloom'. (8:22)

But for the prophet Isaiah, a turning point is coming for the people of God.

Bible Reading Isaiah 9:1-7

Prayer

The Before Picture

Look with me at the start of today's reading, where it says, 'Nevertheless'. (9:1)

'Nevertheless'

This is going to be rather like one of those changing rooms type programmes where you see the before and after pictures, and then you're taken through a makeover that transforms the old and gloomy former décor into something bright and shiny and new.

It may start like this, the presenter says, but things will soon be transformed.

Similarly, Isaiah the prophet says,

'Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress.

In the past he/ God humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but – and here's what's to come after – in the future he/ God will honour Galilee of the nations.'

There may have been gloom and distress now.

'Nevertheless', God is at work on a turning point.

Now we need a bit of background to understand the 'before' picture for the people here.

Isaiah spoke these words in the eighth century BC at one of the darkest times in the history of the people of Israel.

The mighty king of Assyria had conquered the northern provinces of Israel – 'Zebulun and the land of Naphtali' had been turned into Assyrian provinces.

They were weakened and demoralised.

Isaiah uses the word 'humbled' in (9:1).

It means they had been treated with contempt.

'Nevertheless', he declares, 'there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress'. The tide is about to turn.

There is a new dawn coming.

Even though things look black, God is on the move.
For these people there is a great future.

The After Picture

‘The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.
You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder.’ (9:2-3)

Isaiah prophesies a new season when the land is transformed.

There will be a new era of celebration and joy.

It’s like harvest time – one of the best times of year if you live in an agrarian society
– a fruitful time when the gifts of God are celebrated. (9:3)

There will be thankfulness and rejoicing in the very presence of God.

God’s people will celebrate the end of justice and oppression from hostility.

‘Every warrior’s boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be
destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.’ (9:5)

And as they enter into a victory, a victory won for them by God,

God’s people will enjoy freedom. Look at (9:4).

There will be no burdens, no blows from tyrants.

The yoke of the oppressor has gone, and they will receive God’s peace.

‘you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the
rod of their oppressor.’ (9:4)

The Advent journey lifts us out of gloom and despair

and takes us to a new season of rejoicing.

We travel from darkness into light; from despair to hope.

It is 'The zeal of the Lord Almighty [that] will accomplish this.' Says Isaiah in (9:7)

The Turning Point

So what has God done to dispel the gloom?

Well the turning point comes in an event that is both unexpected, and astonishing.

The answer lies in the birth of a baby!

A baby is coming who will turn the tide.

This is the Advent expectation.

Isaiah proclaims it loudly using the traditional Hebrew form

of a public announcement for the birth of a baby. Look at verses 6-7.

'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,

and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the greatness/ increase of his government and peace there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and for ever.' (9:6-7)

The new baby that is coming will be a royal ruler.

The 'government will be on his shoulders'.

But more than this, the new baby is divine. He is God himself.

The turning point of history is the incarnation.

Just look at how amazing this new baby will be.

The child that is to come is:

The 'Mighty God' – God himself in the body of a baby!

He is the 'Everlasting Father' – that is, God the Father, the great 'I Am' from time immemorial.

He is, the 'Prince of Peace' – Jesus the Son who came to earth to bring us peace – peace with God, peace with one another, and peace with ourselves.

He is also the Wonderful Counsellor – God the Holy Spirit, because the word 'Wonderful' here has the meaning out of the ordinary or supernatural.

This baby has the authority of the living God to bring hope to the world.

The titles 'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace' encapsulate the whole being of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Advent journey is one in which we travel from the gloom of where we are to a Christmas season of joy, as the baby is born.

It's very easy in a normal year to want to miss out this part.

To think, like those students of mine, that once you're in Advent, you've already at Christmas.

But if you miss out the journey, the arrival isn't half so satisfying or thrilling.

I believe that this time of the coronavirus gives a special opportunity to savour the transition from darkness to light.

To take some of the ideas we've learned from John Mark Comer's 'The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry' and to continue to practice them.

Let's welcome silence and solitude for the blessing they bring.

We could take the time to re-read some of the gospel stories of people who are waiting in hope and expectation:

Zechariah in the temple receiving a word from the Lord after centuries of silence;
the Virgin Mary in social isolation, in a bubble with her relative Elizabeth,
as she anticipates her baby's arrival;

Joseph coming to terms with God's calling on his life and what the birth will mean
for him.

Or we might take a fresh look at the slow long journey of the Magi,
as they piece together what God's turning point means not only for them,
but for the whole world.

You can find some great books for Advent on websites such as Eden Books or
St Andrews Bookshop – not the same St Andrews as here in Malvern.

For instance, I see that the new Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell,
who wrote the book 'Do nothing to change your life', has brought out
what he calls 'An Advent Calendar with a Difference' entitled, 'Let it Slow'.

To help us on our journey to find hope in the darkness, St Andrews and All Saints
are celebrating the Advent season with a daily five minute video story of hope
from one of our congregation members.

You'll be able to find it on the website from 1 December.

It would be great to include that as part of our daily reflections.

The God Who Brings Light

From beginning to end, throughout the whole of history,

God's plan is to bring light to the darkness,

clarity of vision in the midst of confusion,

and illumination when all around there is gloom and despondency.

At the start of time as we know it in Genesis 1, we read
'Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over
the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering
over the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there
was light.' (1:2-3)

At the end of the Bible in Revelation 22, we read,
'There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light
of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light.
And they will reign for ever and ever. (22:5)

At the beginning and the end of all things,
God makes it clear that he is the one true source of light.

In between these two bookends, Isaiah sees light dawning in the darkness.
And we can do so too.

That's why this reading from Isaiah 9 is frequently used at this time of year.
'The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.' (9:2)

And when the baby is born, it is as if the sun is climbing high in the sky
as we read at the start of John's gospel that
'The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.' (1:9)

That's why it's no mistake that artists over the centuries such as Gerard van
Honthorst or Rembrandt who have meditated on
the baby's arrival have portrayed a child who radiates light.

In their paintings we see shepherds and Magi who have hope dawning in their eyes as they peep over the edge of the manger.

The baby himself radiates the brightest of light.

To see him is to see life in a new way.

Here is the Sovereign, the Saviour, as a baby in human flesh, in real time – so different from how we can have imagined a Saviour to be that he takes your breath away.

And so we need time and space in Advent to reflect, in anticipation of what this turning point of Christmas has to offer.

Advent is just the start. The light has dawned. A new hope is certain.

God has his hand on history. He creates turning points.

And therefore we have hope.

Traditional Reflection

I'm sure that in you've got lots of memories of seeing the sun rise.

So in a few moments of quiet, I'm going to first of all invite you to close your eyes and to imagine that you're waiting in the darkness.

...

Advent waiting – in anticipation.

...

But now the long wait of the dark night is over, and you can see in your mind's eye, the sun ... coming up ...

And now it is so bright that you can't look at it for long.

But your whole experience is changed. Light floods your world with warmth.

Hope dawns afresh as you look out onto a new day.

Contemporary Reflection

We're going to take a few moments now in silence to listen to what God the Holy Spirit might be saying to us today at the start of our Advent journey.

The words come from later on in the book of Isaiah.

The prophet takes us on quite a journey, and as he does so he repeatedly reminds us that the God who speaks into the darkness and brings light, always offers us hope.

Read Isaiah 60:1-3 over this clip:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2L515SmPbRw>

Cut at 36 secs, followed by a few moments silence.

Isaiah 60:1-3; 18-22

'Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.

² See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,

but the LORD rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.

³ Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Isaiah 9:1-7

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honour Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan –

² The people walking in darkness

have seen a great light;

on those living in the land of deep darkness

a light has dawned.

³ You have enlarged the nation

and increased their joy;

they rejoice before you

as people rejoice at the harvest,

as warriors rejoice

when dividing the plunder.

⁴ For as in the day of Midian's defeat,

you have shattered

the yoke that burdens them,

the bar across their shoulders,

the rod of their oppressor.

⁵ Every warrior's boot used in battle

and every garment rolled in blood

will be destined for burning,

will be fuel for the fire.

⁶ For to us a child is born,

to us a son is given,

and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called

Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷ Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and for ever.

The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.