

Online Talk St Andrew's and All Saints

Sunday 6th December 2020

Advent 2: "Faith in the midst of crisis"

Isaiah 7: 3 -17

I wonder how many times you've heard people say "You shouldn't mix politics and religion"? Archbishop Justin Welby took a lot of stick for a speech he made in 2018, in which he condemned zero-hours contracts, criticised the tax system, and said that he dreamed of government putting charities such as food banks, night shelters and debt advice clinics out of business. Back in the 1990s, Alastair Campbell told Tony Blair he "shouldn't do God" because it was a recipe for trouble! Well, a recipe for trouble it certainly can be, now, (pause), as it was for Jesus, and as it was for the Old Testament prophets too; because it challenges the ethos of those in positions of power and holds up human sins and follies to the scrutiny of God and his Word, the Bible.

As we heard in that rather perplexing Bible reading, Isaiah certainly didn't hold back from confronting King Ahaz with the Word of the Lord. Justin Welby spoke on this story at New Wine online this summer, and he described Ahaz as a faithless and irresponsible wimp. The opening verses of chapter 7 describe how he panicked when two kings, Rezin and Pekah, marched upon Jerusalem. His heart and the hearts of his people were shaken like forest trees in a strong wind, even though Rezin and Pekah were unable to overpower the city. Now Isaiah brings him further assurance from God, describing these attackers as nothing but two smouldering stubs of firewood. The Sovereign Lord's message to Ahaz is "Be careful, keep calm, don't be afraid, and don't lose heart." And the punch line is "If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all."

Here I believe is the first message for us to take from this passage. We have faced all sorts of dangers and threats to our safety and peace of mind this year, and they aren't over yet. 'Be careful, keep calm, don't lose heart!' sounds like one of the Downing Street Covid Press Conference mantras, but as the months drag on, with the knowledge that longed-for Christmas freedoms may trigger fresh disasters in the new year, and with all the damage to the economy and individual financial security still unfolding, many people are losing heart. If you are one of those who have that heavy

feeling of dragging dread, here is a message from God, via Isaiah, for you: “Be careful, keep calm, don’t be afraid, and don’t lose heart. If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.”

What does it mean, to stand firm in our faith? I think it means to lean all our weight on God’s promises throughout the Bible, so many that there’s one for every day of the year, plus what we and other people have experienced of his faithfulness in the past. As an old hymn puts it, “His love in times past forbids me to think he’ll leave me at last, in trouble to sink.” Our churches’ on-line Advent Calendar of Hope has a new personal faith story every day, as different members of our churches describe their experience of God being there with them in difficult circumstances. If you haven’t yet started opening it, don’t waste time, catch up and be blessed by it. You can find it on our church website and Facebook page.

Did you notice I just said, “They describe their experience of God being there with them”? That brings us to the other words which leap off the page in Isaiah chapter 7 verse 14: the prophecy of the birth of a baby whose name Immanuel means “God is with us”. After Ahaz has refused God’s gracious offer of a sign of his presence and help, Isaiah’s and God’s own patience are tried to the limit. But a sign is given, in spite of Ahaz’s stupidity, and it begins like this: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” As with many Bible prophecies, there are layers of meaning in these words. The immediate sense of the prophecy in verses 14 to 17 is that a boy will be born during whose childhood Assyria will sweep down and bring disaster on the land. The next chapter tells how Isaiah marries a prophetess who gives birth to a son and gives him a prophetic name. And sure enough, Sennacherib’s invasion of Judah followed, in 701 BC.

But we recognise these words because they are often read in traditional Christmas services of nine lessons and carols, and this is because St Matthew in chapter 1 of his gospel quotes them as a prophecy of the birth of Jesus. Matthew tells the story of Mary’s unexpected pregnancy from the point of view of her devastated fiancé Joseph. He’s planning to annul the engagement, but the angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and says, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” Matthew continues, “All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call

him Immanuel (which means 'God with us')". Joseph did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus."

Matthew doesn't explain how the Virgin Mary's baby, Jesus, fulfils the prophecy of a baby called Immanuel, God with us. It is St John, in the prologue to his gospel, who puts into words what "God with us" means. He speaks of Jesus as the Word, one with God from the beginning, who became flesh and dwelt among us. "He came down to earth from heaven, who is God and Lord of all, and his shelter was a stable, and his cradle was a stall." We sing this every Christmas in the carol Once in Royal David's City, and the words are so familiar that we probably don't think about what they mean. They don't just mean that Jesus was a special baby. They mean that those who met Jesus during his life on earth were literally experiencing God with them. Not all who met him believed his claim to be God, and that cost him his life. But all who responded to his teaching, felt his healing touch and experienced his loving attention to their individual needs were having a one-to-one encounter with God.

That was then, but what about now? Many people today acknowledge a rather vague sense of spirituality. But our faith has much more substance, because it is founded in Immanuel, God with us. Paul explains this in his letters to various groups of new Christians. He says such things as: We don't regard Christ from a human viewpoint any more. People who put their faith in him start a new life because it was through his death that God reconciled the world to himself. Christ in us is the hope of glory. Neither death nor life, nor anything in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord.

The author of the book of Hebrews says that because Jesus took on flesh and blood, he knows what it's like to be human. He suffered, he was tempted, he was rejected, he was homeless, he felt hunger, he cried. So he can come alongside to help us in our times of need.

Jesus lived a short life on earth, only thirty three years, and only the last three of those as a travelling preacher and healer. Shortly before his arrest, crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus told his disciples that he would be leaving them and returning to the Father. He assured them that they wouldn't be deserted or abandoned, because he would send his Spirit to be with them for ever. When this happened, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was given not only for them, but for all the billions of

followers of Jesus, throughout the world, ever since. This is the reality of Immanuel, God with us, today.

It may be that for some of you listening, this isn't yet a reality. If you want to know God with you in this personal way, you might like to pray in the words of this Christmas carol:

O Holy Child of Bethlehem,
 Descend to us, we pray
 Cast out our sin, and enter in;
 Be born in us today.
 We hear the Christmas Angels
 The great glad tidings tell;
 O come to us, abide with us,
 Our Lord Emmanuel.

(Pause) If you have prayed that prayer, and would like to talk more, please do get in touch with us in person or via the church website.

But for those of us who are already followers of Jesus, however wonderful it is to have that personal relationship with him, it shouldn't end there.

St Teresa of Avila said "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

As members of St Andrew's and All Saints, we believe our call is to partner with God in the flourishing of our communities. So how are we each going to be Christ to others this Christmas, to enable them to experience that God is with them? One way is to tell as many people as possible about our Advent Calendar of Hope, and the other Christmas events on the leaflet. Another is to contribute to Helen's bags of Hope. Ask the Holy Spirit to prompt you to share the love of Jesus this Christmas. Wear the badge and pray that people will ask you what it means.

So... we've thought about standing firm in our faith in difficult circumstances, about how the coming of Jesus into our world as Immanuel has given us living hope and the certainty of God with us, and about how we can share this. Let's be quiet and ask the Holy Spirit to tell us what he wants us to remember and act on, from this talk.