

St. Mary's 10.00am Sunday Sermons

1. 11th December 2011

1) St. Mary's, Marlborough
Advent 3 2011 St Mary's PC
John 1:6-8, 19-28

Earlier this week I was talking to someone who although he been a Christian and regular churchgoer for many years expressed some bafflement about what Advent was really about. On the one hand people speak of it being a time in which we prepare to welcome the birth of the Christ Child in Bethlehem – but he has already come 2000 years ago and we continue to worship and celebrate his presence among us. Then he said that he learnt that Advent was about focussing on the 'Four Last Things': death, judgement, heaven and hell – yet a preacher he heard on this said that hell did not exist. (But as someone said who was part of this conversation – whether or not you believe in the reality of hell in the afterlife, there is plenty of hell around us on earth.) In Advent there is a lot of talk about 'waiting' but what exactly are we waiting for? Is it just about preparing to celebrate Christmas?

This Sunday is the 3rd Sunday in Advent and we are exactly halfway through Advent. Because the day of the week of Christmas varies, and this year falls on a Sunday, this year Advent is the longest it can be – four full weeks – which means, if you use the traditional themes gives you a whole week to contemplate hell – which perhaps is what some feel the week leading up to Christmas is like!

But our modern liturgy, with the lighting of the Advent candles, focuses on different themes for the Sundays of Advent. These are: The Patriarchs, the Prophets, John the Baptist, and the Virgin Mary. These themes link the Old Testament with the New – God's covenant with the people of Israel to the coming of Christ.

In the Old Testament there is both the *Presence* of God and the *Promises*. God reveals himself to the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and

Jacob, and makes a covenant with them. He is *present* to them but also *promises* that through them 'all the families of the earth will be blessed' (Gen. 12:3). He is *present* with the Prophets who brings the word of God to his people in their day, but also through them gives future *promises* of deliverance from oppression and evil – that God will intervene to end their suffering.

But then God seems to go silent for about 500 years from the time of Malachi until John the Baptist bursts on the scene – a new prophetic voice. As our Gospel reading today says – he identifies himself with the one spoken of by Isaiah – a voice crying out urging the people to prepare themselves – the promises long spoken about are about to be fulfilled – not through him – but through another who is about to appear. So the focus this Sunday is on John the Baptist.

Then next Sunday, we will focus on the Virgin Mary – the one through whom the promised Messiah would come.

So as each Sunday we light the candles – one candle more each week, representing the different stages in the long unfolding of this divine drama. We then arrive at Christmas Day, with all the peripheral candles lit which are pointing the way, and then the central candle representing Jesus as the Light of the World, born in Bethlehem.

But Advent is not just a time in which we prepare to celebrate the coming of Jesus as a baby born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. The theme of *presence* and *promise* continues with us because as well as the theme of *Emmanuel*, God with us, that we have through the birth of Jesus, so also we have the *promise* of a better future. There is still much suffering, pain and sorrow around. There is still much evil in our world.

Christmas can be a difficult time for many – especially for those who are suffering. In the midst of all the celebrations that God has revealed his great love for us in being born as a human – entering into the pain of this world – drawing alongside suffering humanity – there is still often a sense of "where are you now, God?"

Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God. He demonstrated his victory over sin and death by rising from the dead. He calls all to enter his kingdom through repentance and faith. He is the true Lord of this world – yet many ignore him – many put themselves on the throne, which is why the world is still in the mess that it is.

There has been much debate about what Jesus really meant by the kingdom of God. It speaks of the rule of God and is clearly not a geographical entity but is it a present reality or not? If it is here, where is it?

There is an increasing consensus amongst theologians today that it has both a present and a future aspect – there is a ‘now’ and a ‘not yet’ – to the coming of the kingdom – or again a *presence* as well as a *promise*.

And the *promise* is that one day Christ will come again in glory, when before him every knee will bow, and all the darkness will be banished. It is a vision articulated at the end of the book of Revelation when John had a vision of a renewed redeemed Earth being united with Heaven and when there will be no more death, no more mourning or crying or pain, and that all would be made new (Revelation 21:1-7) It is a vision of a new age, an age glimpsed by the prophets, when God would be at the centre, his rule recognised.

Advent is a time in which we can reflect on that ‘new age’ and prepare ourselves so that should it come we would be ready for it. That is part of the waiting of Advent – encouraging us not to be like the foolish virgins in the parable of Jesus who had no oil for their lamps and when they went off to buy it missed the bridegroom when he came to the wedding feast and so found themselves left outside.

It is perhaps difficult in reality for us to live with the expectation and belief that the second coming of Jesus in glory will happen at any time. We are put off by those who claim to have cracked what they see as a code in scripture and confidently predict the day it will happen and then have to eat their words and recalculate another future date when it

doesn't happen. And there are those theologians who think that the early church believed in the imminent return of Jesus but when he didn't come again started playing down that belief and had to adjust to the fact that he wasn't coming back in that way. So is Advent about trying to hold onto an impossible dream?

I don't think so. I think it is important to hold on to this belief because it says something important about our doctrine of creation – this world is important to God – that one day the created order will be redeemed and made new. The future hope is much more than “going to heaven when you die” – it is about the transformation and renewal of this world. That may be hard to believe – but it does mean that this world is important to God.

So how can Advent speak to us today? I suggest that we use those two words to aid our Advent reflections: *presence* and *promise* and precede them with another, *preparation*.

1. Preparation

John the Baptist urged the people to prepare themselves for the coming of the ‘true light’ that was coming into the world – one through whom the Spirit of God would be outpoured – one through whom God's transforming presence would come. John called the people to repentance and baptism – a symbolic washing away of their sins so that they would be receptive to his coming. Advent is a penitential season – an opportunity to prepare to celebrate the first coming at Christmas, and to prepare our hearts so that we are ready to receive him now by his Spirit in the present and so that we will not be ashamed should we come face to face with him in his glory.

2. Presence

The opening prayer in Common Worship Morning prayer for Advent, has the words ‘As we look for your coming among us this day, open our eyes to behold your presence and strengthen our hands to do your will.’

In his earthly ministry Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God – announcing that God is the true Lord of this world. It often does not look like it because so often Jesus is not recognised as Lord – other gods are worshiped – the idolatry of self, of money and possessions, of power. But where Jesus is acknowledged as king, where people live according to his will, so the transformation of this world is possible – we can begin to see the difference it makes as people show the sacrificial love that Jesus showed.

So Advent can be a time in which we rekindle that vision of the kingdom coming now – ‘your kingdom come your will be done on earth as in heaven.’ We cannot ‘build the kingdom of God by our actions, as some seem to say, but we can be agents through whom God can build his kingdom in the present. So Advent can be a time when we can pray to see the transforming power of God, which was present in the life that started as a baby in Bethlehem, make a difference to the world today through us.

3. Promise

But there is also a future hope as I have already said. And for some people this could be the most important theme of advent – the promise that one day all will be put right. The psalmist expressed what so many feel in their pain – ‘How long, O Lord?’ is a frequent refrain. Anything we do to bring light to this dark world is only a small sign of what will be when Jesus, the light of the world, is fully revealed.

In two weeks we shall all be rejoicing as we celebrate the birth of that light that came into the world. But for those who still feel that they are in a dark place there is the promise that one day all will be put right. Again John in revelation has a wonderful picture of the new heaven and earth united together: ‘...there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever.’ (Rev. 22:5)

So in all the business of the days leading up to Christmas – let’s make time to *prepare* ourselves for the coming of Jesus, to be alert to his *presence* now so that we can be channels of his grace in a dark world, and in the midst of any darkness we feel to hold on to his *promise* that one day all be put right and evil finally defeated.

Maranatha – Come Lord Jesus.

Revd Dr. David Maurice