

Readings for Advent Sunday

1st December 2024

First Reading: Jeremiah 33:14-16

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Gospel: St Luke 21:25-36

Jesus said to his disciples: "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

A Reflection for Advent Sunday

Today, we come to the beginning of Advent and a new church year – Year C in the liturgical cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary which we share with many other denominations, a year in which Luke will be our principle

Gospel. Advent is a time of both looking back to the first coming of Christ as the baby in Bethlehem, and forward to Christ's second coming at the end of time.

In days gone by, it was customary to think on the 'four last things' on the four Sundays of Advent: death, judgment, heaven and hell. In the second half of the twentieth century, the four themes of the patriarchs, the prophets, John the Baptist and Mary, those all playing a significant role leading up to the birth of Christ, were introduced and became commonplace. More recently, other themes have been developed and, following a conversation with David a couple of months ago, we agreed that we would try something different this year. So, this year, our four Advent themes will be hope, peace, joy and love.

Today we start with hope. Advent should be a season of hope as we look forward to Christ's coming again. However, it can be difficult to feel hopeful as we look around the world. And sometimes, when we come to our Bible readings, we need to take a step back and remind ourselves what they are really about.

Today's reading from Jeremiah speaks of God's promise to Israel and Judah, of the execution of justice and righteousness in the land, of Judah being saved and Jerusalem living in safety. In the current climate, we need to remember that this, and many other similar statements in the Bible, are not about the modern state of Israel and the current conflict in the Middle East. These are important promises of God, important prophecies, which refer to the coming of Christ at the end of time when all things will be made new and perfect. They refer to all God's people, not one group. Here, Jerusalem is the heavenly city of peace, not one earthly city in particular. These promises will be fulfilled at the time of God's choosing and God's purposes will not be achieved by humanity taking matters into their own hands. Much of the history of the Old Testament tells us of people trying to do just that, and bringing trouble on themselves and others. Indeed, I was reminded this week that, two thousand years ago, Herod took matters into his own hands and tried to thwart God's purposes by massacring the children of Bethlehem. He failed!

There is hope in God's promises in Jeremiah that ultimately peace will come – on God's terms, at the time of God's choosing. We need to be patient and wait. Our readings today remind us that we are not the ones in control, but they provide reassurance and hope amidst the chaos and confusion of the world.

In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks in apocalyptic terms. It can be tempting, for some, to try to make literal connections between his words and our own time, and then use what he says to predict the future, but that is not their purpose. We are in a time of waiting...yes, in Advent for the birth of baby Jesus, but also for Christ's second coming and the healing of the world, for a new era of peace, love and justice. In the meantime, terrible things will happen, and we are called to be alert, not weighed down by the worries of life, not to be confused by the roaring, or faint from fear, as Luke puts it in various places in this passage. We are called to be hopeful because God's promises are trustworthy and true.

A couple of weeks ago, Christian Aid published an article by the campaigner, Jess Hall, entitled *Why I struggle with hope*. Although the title sounds like a question, it isn't. The article is about why it is important to have hope in times of struggle. In it, she asks a different question: 'How do we hold hope in the midst of trauma and the violence of conflict?' She is referring to the Middle East, but it could equally apply to Ukraine and Russia or any other conflict.

When we look at the world and see things going wrong, she says, we are not neutral observers. As humanity, we have all hurt one another, we have all created poverty through unfairness, we have all neglected to love our neighbour and see in them the image of God. But she goes on:

...many times, throughout history, even amid ... awful realities, something has happened. Groups of people, sometimes Christians, sometimes not, have looked at devastation and seen something else – possibility. I can almost hear them whispering, as they survey their circumstances - It doesn't have to be like this... we can change things.

These whispers have become conversations, leading to action and change – we can think of the Suffragettes, the end of Apartheid in South Africa, the Civil Rights movement in the United States, moves to address climate change.

Change is possible she argues, but it involves struggle, something that is often overlooked afterwards. It is hard to go against the grain; it takes time; it is costly – many of those involved in significant change have spent time in prison. It seems likely that environmental campaigners today also feel that change is a struggle. But, just as faith and doubt are not opposites and can be held together, so struggle and hope can also be held together. Hope, real, gritty hope, is found in the midst of struggle. And God gives us strength for the struggle, as Paul alludes to in today's reading from his letter to the Thessalonians.

In another of his letters, that to the Romans, Paul also said: 'Hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?' So, hope is challenging. It requires us to imagine the possibilities; to imagine a world restored, to imagine what is unseen. Challenging...but vital.

In her article, Jess Hall also quoted another writer, Rebecca Solnit, who said that hope is '...the belief that what we do matters, even though how and when it might matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand. We may not know them afterwards either, but they matter all the same...'

Jess Hall concluded her article by saying that, as Christians, we are called to patient, faithful acts of hope, even in the worst situations. It may be tempting to give up, but we have a choice to make: will we act in hope for peace and justice or not? We have a just and good God, and we do not accept that darkness wins. Friday (Good Friday) may be long and hard and dark, but we are a people who hold hope of resurrection and restoration. We hold the hope of (Easter) Sunday even while we live through Friday.

We are called to be hopeful because God's promises are trustworthy and true. That's what Jeremiah was getting at. Jeremiah is hopeful: in waiting for the righteousness of the Lord to come, we focus on the kingdom of God. So, at the beginning of Advent, the beginning of this new year, let us recommit ourselves to being people of hope, to being God's kingdom here and now.