

A Reflection from Revd Ali for the Second Sunday in Advent.

Advent is a time of preparation. A time to slow down, to take stock, to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Light. Sometimes, we can get caught up the worldly perception of Advent. Even in this most strange of years, we are bombarded by the media with images of a perfect family Christmas, that will come to pass if we just buy this product, gift, that thing or participate in this activity. How much anxiety is being generated by thinking that we have to have 'the perfect Christmas' within the Government guidelines. How will we live up to the advertising hype of perfection when we cannot travel or invite our extended family to visit? Will we have 'failed at Christmas' if we are alone or don't have the resources to spend on making everything 'merry and bright'? I wonder if this year, the year when we have all been forced by the Covid 19 to live our lives in a different way. I wonder, will this be the year, when we engage with the mystery of Christmas in a new and meaningful way.

Our Gospel reading starts by paraphrasing a passage from Isaiah (40:3). The book of Isaiah was written nearly 600 years before the birth of Jesus. It was a dark time in the history of the people of God. A large part of the nation were in exile in Babylon. The people of God were a people dispossessed, living in a strange land and having to survive on the whim of others. In a time of misery and isolation, Isaiah's words of comfort brought hope and the promise of the one who would come to lead the people home. The people of God returned from Babylon around 538 B.C. but this wasn't the complete fulfilment of the promise voiced by Isaiah. Despite being led by God through the desert to Jerusalem, despite no longer being slaves to the Babylonians, the people of God were still waiting. Waiting and longing for the Messiah. The one who would be sent by God to set them truly free.

Then John came, proclaiming it was time to make way for the Lord. The people of God were now living under an army of occupation. Rome could command the people's service, their money and their obedience. John told the people of God that they were coming close to the one who would set them free. Freedom, not just from the occupying forces of Rome, but the one who would offer them freedom through forgiveness of their sins. The one who would offer them a new covenant relationship with God through Jesus. John told the people of God that they had reached a time to make a decision. They could be tied to the grim worldly reality of their lives under a foreign force of occupation. Or, they could allow themselves to dream. To be caught up in the vision of long held promises being realised. Many of the prophets in the history of the people of God, had promised the people that they would see God with their own eyes. Now John was telling them that the time was close, that the Messiah was present and they had to get ready to see God on earth.

This wasn't a passive waiting for the revelation of the Messiah. It was a time of active preparation. The people had to get ready to receive the great good news of the coming of the Christ. To prepare themselves by repentance of their sins. Isaiah had spoken of preparing the way in the wilderness. John was physically in the wilderness on the east side of the Jordan encouraging the people to start the process of preparing the way. They didn't have to get shovels and start levelling the road. They just had to bring a metaphorical shovel to their lives and clear out the 'stuff' that was creating distance between them and God. To clear away the 'stuff of the world' and to live lives that were honouring to God and honouring to others. To repent, be baptised and to live their lives in a new way. In active anticipation.

Some people thought that John was referring to himself, as the one they had been waiting for. But John is unequivocal. He states that he isn't even worthy to untie the straps of the one that was coming. He wasn't worthy to do the lowliest job in the household. To take off the shoes of someone who has walked a dusty path and to wash their feet. John in his humility points them, and us, to Jesus. The one in whom all the promises of God, shared through the prophets would be realised.

Through Jesus the hopes and dreams of the people of God, and of all humanity, would not just be realised but surpassed.

As we travel through this season of Advent, we sing songs of longing such as 'O Come O Come Immanuel'. We remember that God broke into our history in the person of Jesus that first Christmas. We also remember his promise to come again in glory to bring about a new heaven and a new earth. Today's readings remind us, that we too need to prepare ourselves - not just for coming close to the mystery of Christmas but also for the second coming of Christ. We too need to make straight the way for the Lord. We have been given the gift of Advent, to help us to prepare to encounter the mystery of Jesus' presence with us again at Christmas. So how do we prepare, how do we make room in our hearts, how do we make straight the way for the Lord?

We have the gift of Advent to identify the things that block the way to a full and real relationship with God. Those things will be different for all of us. They may be the pressures of the world. They may be unrealistic expectations, that we have of ourselves or that others have of us. They may be unhealthy attachments to things or people, that we know aren't any good for us. They may be patterns of behaviour that we know need to change, but change can be scary. Even if we know those things are wrong. The familiar can be seductive and change difficult. But in all that work, God promises to be with us. God too, will pick up the metaphorical shovel and be alongside us as we clear out the 'stuff' that is holding us back. God will walk with us in every inch of the path that we clear to be ready to meet with Jesus.

Repentance is part of our Advent journey. When we repent God promises to forgive us for our sins. There *is* the offer of forgiveness for all of us, but sometimes we find it hard to accept forgiveness - from God or from ourselves. But our God is a forgiving God, who longs for us to come close, to say sorry and mean it, then to receive the fullness of God's grace and forgiveness, always.

And God promises us a new direction. Through the prophet Isaiah, God promised a time when a highway through the desert would be made straight to welcome a king. God the King welcoming his people home. There is the longed for hope of Jesus' return when the journey to the new heaven and earth will be without potholes and roadworks and dangerous bends.

And that is the Advent hope. The real and tangible hope of new life through Jesus Christ. The one that was born a vulnerable child in a time of forced occupation. The one that fled as a refugee from a dangerous dictator. The one who grew into a man who shared God's vision for humanity. The one who shared his ministry of love, justice and reconciliation with all of us. The one who paid the ultimate price for our sin. Who is the new covenant with God. The one who will come again in glory and in him, all our hopes and dreams will be reconciled. So let us all get ready, make way, make straight the path of the Lord.

Amen