

Advent and the lead up to Christmas often feels like a complicated time of year. On the one hand we want to embrace the anticipation, the hope, the joy, the excitement of the season. On the other hand there seems like an increasing number of things to 'fit in' or do, so that we can be ready. I don't know about you but I feel strung between wanting to enjoy – and wanting it all to be over!

Advent reminds us each year of our yearning for the coming of God, for a time that will be different, but it also reminds us of the patience that is required in living out our faith as we watch and wait, not just in advent – but daily.

I was thinking about our conversations during Kingdom season – about the images we have of God and how those images and expectations shape who we understand God to be. Sometimes the expectations we have mask who God really is, or limits our ability to hear what God is saying to us. Sometimes our images stop us from seeing God in our midst, because God comes and is revealed in ways that are outside what we are prepared to see.

This week I have been to two funerals – the first on Tuesday was for a fellow Priest. It was a rare occasion for me of attending a funeral, rather than leading it – and then yesterday we had the funeral here for Lois. They were both very moving occasions, celebrating two individuals who had a strong belief in God, and in the role that God had in their lives. I was struck on both occasions by the confidence that was expressed within the funerals of what is to come – the promise that we will all be united in heaven. It was very reassuring – but it also made me reflect that at times of great stress – particularly for many in grief we express a confidence in God that so often at other times in our lives we don't.

What is it then that at moments, when we are most human, that allows us to cry out to God, that when we are strong we can often find difficult?

The prophet Isaiah which we heard read earlier records a glimpse into this part of the human condition! *Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God...* This poem opens the second part of the book of Isaiah, which contains poems reflecting the impact of Persian expansion under Cyrus the Great on the peoples living in exile after the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem. Cyrus, ruled more than 150 years after the historical Isaiah advised king Hezekiah during the Assyrian defeat of the northern kingdom of Israel¹. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah reflect this period of destruction, while the poems in chapter 40-55 are filled with hope and joy because Cyrus allowed

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3491

the exiles to return home. It is this which we hear in this beautiful passage from Isaiah today.

The Israelites understood pain – as so much of the Old Testament records their journey – their desire to return home – and their calling out to God when they are at their most vulnerable.

When do we cry out to God? When do we come to God bare of all our baggage, and prepared to hear the comfort and hope that God offers?

These images of the wilderness – of the times when we most need God's comfort and reassurance are beautifully described in Isaiah – but over a Millennium later John the Baptist, and the writer of Mark's Gospel record and use a similar image.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight," " John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Mark 1: 2-4

Mark's Gospel doesn't begin with the story of the Nativity, but with the story of John the Baptist – the story of one who prepares us – the story of one who strips away all the baggage and speaks straight about the nature of God and of our human frailty. It is a confronting image in our Advent season – a time when we prepare for the coming of God – not just at Christmas but every day.

The second Sunday of Advent is a Sunday on which we remember the role of the Prophets – those who point us to Christ – Isaiah and John being two such prophets. What is interesting about Prophets is that they are generally not very popular people, as they strip away all expectations and they challenge us to step outside our comfort zone and see God as God sees us. At times it is confronting.

Notice that Mark begins his account not simply by saying that his work is "The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," but rather "The beginning of the good news...." It's so easy to be taken off guard by the brevity, even terseness of Mark's opening line – no angels and shepherds here, no genealogies or hymns to God's eternal Word – that we overlook it altogether. But maybe Mark is trying to tell us something. David Lose suggests that Mark regularly suggests rather than declares – that his whole story about Jesus, beginning with John the Baptist and running through the calling of his disciples, healing the sick and feeding the hungry, and culminating in his death ... it's all just the beginning.

The story of the good news of Jesus Christ, that is, continues... to this day... and among our people! And given the headlines and scandal and upheaval and unrest and general anxiety of these days – these may come as timely and important word².

Amid all that confronts us in our world, we need to remember that the story of good news continues. God is still at work working in us and with us, and will continue to do so when Advent ends! There is a story which is bigger than what we hear in the news, or the worries that limit our ability to have courage in God. God is not done. We are not yet what we have been called to be. The promise of Christmas is bigger than we'd imagined. And God's mercy and courage and blessing extends farther and deeper than we can imagine.

The promise we hear in the words of each funeral service, the promise we hear proclaimed by Isaiah, and John the Baptist and all the prophets confirms this. God is at work, but we need to strip away our expectations, strip away our baggage – we need to look into the barrenness of the wilderness – for it is here that we will have no choice than to see the work which God is under taking. God, like in the story of the nativity arrives in unexpected places, amidst unlikely circumstances.

I suspect many of us this week have been dismayed at the events which have taken place in Jerusalem, a community with such a complex history – and even more complex future. But despite the dangerous politics which is being played out on the world stage are communities of faithful Jews, Muslims and Christians who have prayed and will continue to pray each day within this holy city; and we should pray with them – for peace – for the ongoing work of God in this world – that God's kingdom of peace might be realised.

And when we are dismayed, we should remember that when Christ was born over 2000 years ago, when Isaiah spoke, when John the Baptist prophesied – at these times too – Jerusalem was struggling – and yet God's work continues. In light of this it is often hard for us to be patient, hard for us to continue to believe. But if we learn nothing else from our readings today it is that we should take comfort, for God is here, and God is coming and is still at work.

One of the things which gives me courage to see God each Advent, is a poem which we now read each year as part of our Carols service. I think today – as we remember the words of the prophets, it is timely for us to hear them again. For we need to ever vigilant for God at work in our midst, and open to the baggage we might need to leave behind.

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/12/advent-2-b-just-the-beginning/>

Advent Calendar by Rowan Williams

He will come like last leaf's fall.
One night when the November wind
has flayed the trees to the bone, and earth
wakes choking on the mould,
the soft shroud's folding.

He will come like frost.
One morning when the shrinking earth
opens on mist, to find itself
arrested in the net
of alien, sword-set beauty.

He will come like dark.
One evening when the bursting red
December sun draws up the sheet
and penny-masks its eye to yield
the star-snowed fields of sky.

He will come, will come,
will come like crying in the night,
like blood, like breaking,
as the earth writhes to toss him free.
He will come like child³.

³ <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2280/advent-calendar-a-poem-by-dr-rowan-williams>