

Today as we start a new year, and a new Advent – and there is a sense of expectation and hope – a sense of longing of what is to come. I have learnt to love this time of year in London – it is so different from Sydney – where the days are long and hot. But here where the days are short and dark the advent theme of watching and waiting takes on a new meaning. Most of our Advent liturgies are based on this sense of longing for light to come into the darkness.

Last night some of us attended the Advent Procession at St Paul’s Cathedral – a service which makes the most of our darkness and the symbolism of the light of Christ being brought into our midst. Songs of yearning and longing – not just for the birth of Christ but also for the time when he will come again and the world will be transformed. We often steer away from this idea of the Jesus return I suspect because it is not comfortable to talk about – and yet the structure of Advent ensures that all of the church begins its advent journey with this very thought.

According to the over-all design of the three-year lectionary, the Gospel texts for the First Sunday are always apocalyptic, anticipating the second coming of Christ. They are readings of warning, but also of hope. But one of the things which many commentators have reflected on this year is the fact that at the heart of this message is ‘do not fear’ – and it would appear to many, and I think I would agree with them, that most of what we face as individuals, communities and nations at present is a result of fear. Fear of the unknown, fear of the other, fear of our assumptions, fear of our experience.

David Lose, who is a theological commentator I often read and quote put it this way:

The greatest challenge we face today is not war, or economic inequity, or community unrest, or prejudice, or division, but fear. Why? Because fear is at the root of all these other things I just mentioned. Fear causes us to horde, assuming we will never have enough and seeing those around us as competitors for scarce resources. Fear drives wedges of distrust into our communities that fracture solidarity and compassion. Fear causes us to define ourselves and those around us not by what we share but by what makes us different. Fear, in short, drives us inward, hardens our hearts, darkens our vision, and stunts our imagination¹.

But if we think this a new phenomenon – something that is of our generation or even caused by Brexit - we are mistaken, because if we listen to Jesus message in today’s gospel, he is addressing the same fear.

Today passage takes place in the run up to Jesus crucifixion and resurrection. And Jesus knows enough about the fear that they are all feeling about the political situation they are in to say to the disciples “People will faint with fear and foreboding about what is coming upon the earth” (26). And yet Jesus tells his disciples to “stand up and raise your heads.” And why does he do this, not because it is a secret code about the end of time, rather, it is because, even though “heaven and earth will pass away, my words will not pass away.”

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/11/advent-1-c-courage/>

Jesus knows their fear, knows they want reassurance, and yet he draws them back to the core, his words will not pass away. God's promise will never pass away.

This was a powerful message to the disciples at a time of great political and personal upheaval, and it is also a powerful message to us as we come to the start of another advent time.

I don't know about you, but in some ways, Advent seems to have taken me by surprise this year. At one level I am ready – well the gifts to post to Australia in boxes waiting to go to the post office – and yet in so many other ways I feel like yesterday was Queen's Park Day and it is the start of the autumn term. The darkness of winter seems to have arrived too quickly.

Advent is a season of watching and waiting in the darkness. And while I like the darkness, I do not feel ready for the journey. So much of Advent is about being caught between joyful expectation and the harsh realities of our present situation, while we wait for the promise to be fulfilled. Maybe this means we are never ready for it, and in some way, this is the point of the season.

The disciplines of Advent, this watching and waiting, puts the church at odds with contemporary culture, in which the season consists of bright lights and celebrations and packages tied with neat bows. There is no room for darkness and little patience for prayerful expectation. The prophet Jeremiah who we heard early speaks to a community that is acutely aware of this tension. Jerusalem has been completely devastated in the Babylonian invasion of 587 BCE, and the inhabitants scattered, and yet they must sit with the question 'where is God in our midst?' Our darkness is so real – our isolation so present – our fear so overwhelming – where can we find God?

For Jeremiah however, this is not a cry of hopelessness, rather it is a cry of promise. God is with us in the darkness, as well as the light. Or as Jesus says nearly 700 years later to the disciples, the word of God will never leave you.

And this is where the promise is more than an empty threat. What is the word of God – it is Jesus! This is the promise of Christmas which we will celebrate in 23 days. *The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us' (John 1: 1)*

Throughout the Gospel's Jesus promises not to abandon his disciples amid the tumult and trauma of the world but to be with them, strengthen and encourage them, and equip them not merely to endure the challenges of the day but to flourish. But let us be clear here – Jesus' promises do not eliminate fear or hardship from the lives of his disciples – then or now – but rather create courage, the ability to be faithful, to do one's duty, to retain vision and compassion and empathy, even while afraid.

So what do we do with these promises as we come into this season?

To be honest, at times it seems like this is a hard question to answer – but in preparing for our Advent Refection which starts this coming Thursday, I have been readings exerts from Aquinas, who says *'God is the reward and the end of all our labours: I am your protector and your supreme reward. This union consists in seeing perfectly: At present we are looking at a confused reflection in a mirror, but then we shall see face to face.'*²

I found this image of the confused reflection in the mirror a helpful one. So often we look at biblical text, or theological reflection and expect clarity or answers, but so often because of our experience or fear or context, what we see is a mere reflection of what is possible.

Jesus prepares his disciples for his death by giving them encouragement and hope in the face of their fears. We are encouraged to see ourselves within this story, see our reflection in the light of God's word in our lives.

Maybe this is the promise which Advent brings for each of us, a time of expectation and hope when we make time to have the courage to look at our own reflection, and see what God is forming within us. A time to see ourselves as God sees us.

At the back of church there are lots of resources which can help us with this journey. Studies and reflections which encourage us to make space in this Advent season to notice our fear of the darkness, or the future, or of others, and to find courage in the reflection of God in our lives.

Last night at St Paul's I was once again reminded of the power of light and reflections. The dance of the shadows from the candles on the mosaics and on people's faces. The echo of the voices from the choir as the songs bounced of the dome and inside our hearts. The smell of the incense and the dance of its fragrance as our prayers rose to heaven. It felt that this advent service in some way was a symbol or even a map for a journey this advent. A time to pray, a time to sit in the darkness and notice the shadows and light; to have the courage to look at our reflection and see God.

My prayer for each of us this Advent is that we will have time for expectant waiting, which gives us courage in the face of our fears and allows each of us to see what God is reflecting within each of us. That we each may see ourselves as God sees us, and that this may give us the strength to continue learn and grow. Amen.

² Credo in Deum: Opuscula Theologia 2 – Sermon on the Apostles creed.