

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 thys 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.

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. Since I took my faith seriously I have been taught, and indeed I have taught, that these readings also help us deal with real focus on Advent – the focus on preparation for the second coming of Christ and not Christmas. Advent is a time of watching and waiting, or preparing – time for celebration will come.

But as I read the readings set for Advent Sunday this year, there is a another resonance for me. I find that I relate more, not to the waiting and yearning, but rather to the frustration and almost anger expressed by Isaiah. I can't think about the oncoming apocalypse because the imagery of Mark's Gospel has nothing on what we have actually seen in reality this year across our world. Isaiah's cry in the first reading – "Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" – is our cry, even if we have a hard time giving it voice. Isaiah's plea to God is as simple as it is stark: Show up and do something! You know, like God used to do when God rescued Israel from Egypt¹. We may not have use these words – but I suspect at some point we have all thought it. And if we haven't take it out on God, I suspect at some point we have taken it out on someone else!

I have been shocked – though maybe I shouldn't be- at the number of people who seem to think that the events of the past twelve months have only impacted on them, that they are the only ones who have missed out, the only ones who are looking at their 4 walls, the only ones who can't go to their favourite group each week (and so therefore should just do it), or the only ones who are finding it hard! I think what has surprised me most is not the selfishness of such statements, but that those who have said them have then pushed the boundaries and made life difficult for others. I have found myself, like Isaiah cry out often, especially in recent weeks 'Lord help us – can you not see us?'

I think I have come to realise that Isaiah is disappointed that he is losing sight of God's promise; though I wonder if his disappointment is not in God but in humanity. I know that God is constant, whatever I call out, (as did Isaiah) and the pain, and the disappointment is so often as a result of the behaviour or selfishness of others, or my own inability to behave in the way I wish I could. To have courage to speak out when the selfishness of another puts us all at risk.

So if this Advent for us is not a time of the oncoming apocalypse what is it?

¹ <https://www.davidlose.net/2020/11/advent-1-b-small-things/>

Well this is where the reading we hear from the Gospel might help us. I suspect it seems strange that the Gospel on Advent Sunday is the pre-runner in Mark to the Easter narratives of the crucifixion. Mark seems to re-tell this parable for two reasons. The first is the reality the early church were not only waiting for the imminent return of Christ, but that by the time Mark is writing there is so much turmoil they feel like they are already living out these predictions.

The second purpose is Mark's retelling is that it employs the four "time-stamps" of the parable – evening, midnight, cockcrow, dawn – to mark the scenes of the passion about to commence – gathering with his disciples at evening, betrayed and arrested at midnight, denied at cockcrow, and sentenced to death at dawn. Mark locates this parable of the end times to focus the mind of the reader on what is to come. God will be revealed not so much at the end of time, but at the cross, in the hidden and expected unveiling of God's greatest work. Religious authorities mocked it. Bystanders dismissed it. Even his disciples missed it. Yet in that small and broken figure of Jesus on the cross, God was at work, rending to pieces all that would divide us from God, closing the gap between what we deserve and what God wants to give us, promising to be with us and for us in and through all things².

The message which is offered in this reading, which we might miss if we are distracted is that while we are waiting for God, in fact God is already in our midst, already at work, already holding us! This gives us an amazing gift in an Advent such as this one when we are impatient for the comfort and joy of the Christmas season. Because at the heart of the Christmas story is the promise that God not only came in the small and vulnerable form of a baby born to poor and frightened parents, but that God keeps coming in small, vulnerable, unexpected, and unlooked for ways even now. In fact, each time we reach out to another in love, God is once again invading the kingdoms and structures of this world with God's radical and transformative presence and grace.

We all know that comfort does not last forever, but if what we offer this Advent and Christmas is some sense of comfort in a broken and frighten world then we won't need to call out like Isaiah 'where are you God?', because in fact we will we an expression of God already here. David Lose in his commentary on this reading reminded me that the message of Christmas is about lots of small thing – a baby, shepherds, light, dark, angels, gifts and even hope. I wonder if we can let this transform our own expectations of not only this season but of the way we live as a community.

What small things can we do in love through which God's presence and redemption are revealed (the root of the word apocalyptic, interestingly enough!)? What small gestures might we offer that signify our trust that God is with us and for us? What small sacrifices might we make – including, maybe, the sacrifice of not gathering

² <https://www.davidlose.net/2020/11/advent-1-b-small-things/>

with others when doing so risks spreading the coronavirus – that provide opportunities to see God still at work loving and blessing God’s people and world?³

I had wanted us this Advent to spend time thinking about who we are as a parish now that we are single congregation and can begin to think creatively about the wonderful resource we have in this building and this community. I wanted us to think about what defines us now, what new things we might do? But what I have realised is that this is a both/and situation. While many things have changed for us, much has also stayed the same; and there are many changes still to come.

I was in a meeting on Wednesday when the facilitator was suggesting we don’t get hung up on Christmas and Advent rather our focus needs to be on 2021 and all that will need to be done and we need to build up resilience for this. When we broke into small groups I reflected that this was a bit like telling someone half way through running a marathon that they needed to train. It’s too late.

But I think I am realising in the end it is about the little things. Now for Advent, at Christmas, for our parish and in the years that are to come. It is the small gestures that nurture trust; the small sacrifices that might mean I have to give something up to allow another to shine; it is the small acts of love which nurture and hold us all.

The message of Advent, like that of Easter and Christmas is the same. God is faithful; God is with us no matter how hard things may feel. It is a message of comfort and I hope joy. So as we move into this season, maybe we need to create our own new traditions, maybe we put up the tree early, or even eat a little Christmas cake now, or have mince pie picnics? Maybe this year, after such a time, Advent is less about the waiting, and more about seeing that God is already here – in the little actions of love and waiting for us to respond. Amen.

³ <https://www.davidlose.net/2020/11/advent-1-b-small-things/>