

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. And this year it is even more complicated as we find new ways of preparing and celebrating, as well as trying to understand what the latest guidance says for the celebrations we might want to have.

One of the gifts of the readings during Advent however is that they are solid reminders that we are not the first people to struggle and nor will we be the last! I have noticed this year, more than any other, that often limitations reveal something else that otherwise I might not have seen. Having to strip things down means that at some level we must decide what is truly important.

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. The images and expectations we have 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.

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 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?

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

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. Prophets are forerunners – those who go before and prepare for something that is to come. What is interesting about Prophets is that they are generally not very popular people, as the 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 hymns to God’s eternal Word – that we overlook it altogether. Mark points us to the reality that the stories we hear during Advent and Christmas are only the beginning of the good news, this work continues in the way that we live today! ².

Amid all that confronts us in our world, we need to remember that the story of good news continues. God is still at working in us and with us, and will continue to do so when Advent ends! There is a story which is bigger even than the Pandemic or Brexit 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.

As well as the promise of God, I wonder if on this day when we remember the Prophets we have something else to ponder? Who are the Prophet’s in our own time, those who have courage to speak in the face of uncertainty, who are the

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

forerunners – those who are preparing the ground for something else that is to come?

Prophet's like Isaiah, and John the Baptist strip away our expectations, strip away our baggage – help us 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, and often revealed to us by unlikely people.

I have had a series of strange and complicated conversations this past week, from a wonderful PCC meeting in which we struggled with how to celebrate Christmas this year; conversations with Edgerton's family about how best to honour his amazing life within the limits of current restrictions, conversations with Islamia about how to get share hot meals with those who are most vulnerable. In all the conversations I have had there was a common question – what is it that is important in what we are doing. At the heart of all these conversations was the acknowledgement that God is in our midst, with us – just as Isaiah and Mark promise – still working – and it was this that needed to shine out.

I realised too that we could have these conversations because of the work of others before us. Those who have prepared us for frank and difficult conversations, those who have taught us that there is not only one way to do things. It is those forerunners who by their example help us do things differently, to have the courage to find new ways.

Isaiah remind us to take comfort, to find comfort – for we have, and we will see God. But like all things we may have to let go our preconceived ideas and expectations to do this. One of the people who encourages me is Rowan Williams; and his Advent Poem reminds us of not only the promise of Advent, but of the need to let go of what we think we might see.

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>