

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 1 December 2019, 11.00am

David Thompson

First Sunday of Advent 1st December

- **Isaiah 2: 1-5**
- **Matthew 24: 36-44**

When I found out that my first sermon at Hinde Street was on the First Sunday of Advent, I thought it would be appropriate to purchase a book to take me through the journey of the season and inspire me for this sermon. Despite spending a lot of time searching various websites and looking down the long list of the Archbishop of York's of Advent books going back a number of years, I failed to find one that met my expectations, one that would fit my theology and for sure did not inspire me to write this sermon.

But upon reflection, in this search I found the message of Advent-we wait for the coming of the Messiah and in it we expect certain standards when in reality he will come when we least expect it and in his coming in Jesus as the child in a manger- will be far different from our expectations.

This morning's scripture readings teach us to hope and to be watchful. Firstly what does it mean to hope?

Our first reading is a poem from Isaiah which is a vision of a future Jerusalem beyond the present dismay. There is a stark contrast between what is and what will be but the vision he has is a stable one far beyond the vulnerability of what was then a young Jerusalem where people will be united under God who will judge and bring about a new period of peace where "peoples shall beat their spears into pruning hooks; a nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." It is a hopeful future which we can feel in the words that Isaiah longs for but one that is far away. As the years went on and Jerusalem was faced with further hardship during the days of the Roman Empire, many Jewish people began to read into Prophets such as Isaiah and concluded that there would come a Messiah which would make this reality real-often termed the Messianic age.

Fast forward to 21st century Britain, it is hard not to find solace with Isaiah's vision, for there is also chaos, vulnerability and for certain division. During Advent we will go to the polling stations for the third General election in four and half years as citizens of a country that is more divided than ever over an issue that will not go away. We too hope for a future that will bring about stability, prosperity and a greater cohesion in our communities. And we long for a Messiah that will deliver it. And if we pay attention to the news and watch as the rise of populism in both our major political parties further divides us-that future we long for seems far off.

But as I was reminded by my optician last weekend when discussing the current state of affairs, there is much good still left in the world, we just have to go out and find it. And in doing so we will find Christ-He may not meet our expectations but he is there. It is this then that leads me onto my second point. What does it mean to be watchful?

The second passage in Matthew, presents us with somewhat of a challenge. It is found amongst other passages that discuss the end of times such as the Parables of the Ten Bridesmaids, the Talents and the Sheep and Goats a chapter later. In truth these very much reflect the mood of the early Christians, for although the Messiah had come in Jesus the reality that was discussed in Isaiah had not come to be. There was still persecution, the Romans still occupied Israel and there was

uncertainty. Drawing on the promises of Jesus that he will come again, they waited for a second coming, the Parousia.

The Gospel writer tells us that this will come when we least expect it and that in reality it will be like the days of Noah when people were eating, drinking and marrying whilst he built a boat. In other words, people were going about their everyday tasks as they still did at the time of Noah and Matthew and still do today. And so because of this they were swept away in the flood. And in the example of the householder, we learn that we can miss the coming of the Lord if we fail to watch.

Therefore, we cannot let our everyday realities get the best of us and instead we must lie in wait for the Parousia. Pope John XXIII was once asked of what he would advise people in the Vatican to do if he heard that Christ was coming a second time, he responded "Look busy".

However, there is a difficulty in interpreting these verses as such by seeing the "coming of the Son of Man" and the Parousia as a big cosmic event where we should be awake if he returns, undermines the fidelity of Jesus. Instead there is another way of reading into this. Of recognising the presence of Jesus in human life.

The great 20th century theologian Karl Barth, interpreted the Parousia in a different way. Rather than the second coming of Christ in flesh, he saw the Parousia as the Holy Spirit. Therefore, if this is so then the Parousia is already here and present within our lives and others. We are not always aware of this reality and it may never meet our expectations but when we find and recognise it we are delivered through the storm and arrive safely through the ark that is the reality of Christ. We just have to be watchful. Advent, therefore is a time of waiting but also reminds us of the importance to recognise Christ in the neighbour regardless of who they are.

There is an old Jewish story from the Talmud that reads as so.

Rabbi Joshua came upon the Prophet Elijah as he was standing at the entrance of Rabbi Simeonben Yochchai's cave.

He asked him: 'When is the Messiah coming?'

The other replied: 'Go and ask him yourself.'

Where shall I find him?'

'Before the gates of Rome.'

'By what sign shall I know him.'

'He is sitting among the poor people covered with wounds. The others unbind all their wounds at once then bind them up again. But he unbinds one wound at a time, and then binds them up straightway. He tells himself: "Perhaps I shall be needed (to appear as the Messiah) and I must not take time and be late!"'

So he went and found him and said: 'Peace be with you, my master and teacher!'

He answered him: 'When are you coming master?'

He answered him: 'Today!'

Thereupon he returned to Elijah and said to him: He has deceived me, he has indeed deceived me. He told me "Today I am coming, "and he has not come."

But the other said to him-“This is what he told you “Today-if you would only hear his voice.”

If only you would hear his voice!

It is often said by Christians that we are Resurrection people because we believe in the victory of light over darkness in the resurrection of Jesus from the cross, but we are incarnational people too, God with us, Immanuel, the Word made flesh, the Divine amongst us and within us.

Advent teaches us to be both hopeful and watchful for the coming of the Messiah.

At Christmas-God incarnate is Jesus.

And like me with my inability to find the perfect Advent book or Rabbi Joshua's disappointment on not noticing the Messiah amongst the poor at the gates of Rome, the saviour may be far different from what we expect.

But in service to the other and difficult though may it be we may find God in the poor, the Brexiter, the remainer and even a child in a manger in Bethlehem.