

Sermon preached by David Cruise at Hinde Street Methodist Church, London W1 on the
Second Sunday in Advent 2015

When I served as a minister in the Copperbelt in Zambia I remember a fine new road being built into a township and it was complete with speed bumps. This was fine until soon after the road was completed a Government Minister and his wife came to visit the township. Well you had to be polite – you couldn't expect them to be bumped up and down when they hit the speed bumps so the speed bumps were taken away and then replaced after the visit. This was fine until another Government Minister announced he was to visit. Well you had to treat Government Ministers in the same way so the bumps were again removed and then replaced after the visit. But this took a great deal of effort and how often could you go on doing this. Then someone had a bright idea. What if the rather than having bumps in the road you had dips. Then when there is a VIP visit you could just fill in the troughs with sand and when the visit you could take the sand away – problem solved.

This memory goes back many years - but ever since every Advent when I hear those words 'Prepare Ye the way of the Lord , every ravine must be filled in, every hill and mountain be levelled off and the rough places made smooth - my mind goes back to that township in Zambia.

These words of course said by John the Baptist quoting from the Prophet Isaiah when he started preaching in the desert. And his message was REPENT. Now the word REPENT in English carries very negative tones and is inclined to be all about sin, doom and gloom. 'Repent for the end of the world is nigh.' But the original Greek word from which it is translated, 'metanoia' I would suggest is better described by that experience in Zambia. Yes, we make mistakes but we can be forgiven our mistakes, learn and move on and discover new possibilities. This is what repentance is all about. So let us this morning rejoice as we repent and see what new lessons and opportunities open to us in this Advent season.

And the first step in repenting is going forward trusting God and being confident in the future.

This is what the passage from Isaiah which John the Baptist quoted is all about. The Israelites are in Exile in Babylon – but they have learned from the mistakes that took them there, they have repented, and now there are new possibilities. God is coming to them and leading them out The future is open and exciting and full of hope.

Confidence – assurance, trust. 'Prepare the way of the Lord' – letting God lead us forward.

I hope you enjoyed that reading from Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi. Clearly Paul was on a high when he wrote it. Yes, he was in a prison cell but we can see his face wreathed with of smiles as we read those wonderful words of his 'Whenever I pray for you all, my prayers are always joyful.' And Why are his prayers joyful? I quote: 'Because of the

part you have taken in the work of the Gospel from the first until now' and then he goes on 'Of this I am confident, that he who started the good work in you will bring it to completion by the day of Christ.

I like to think of Paul writing to us here in Hinde Street Methodist Church and his prayers being full of joy for we meet together in confidence in the Gospel of God's love particularly in this Advent season when we think of Christ present. 'Who was and is and is to come.

Memories - Christmas is full of memories. At this time of the year my mind goes back to one day when I was in Theological College and a group of us sat round and related how we came to offer for the ministry. Most told influences of family background etc but one told how he had had no faith but just before Christmas he had been taken by his girl friend to a Carol Service at an Oxford College. As he sat there and listened to the carols and readings he thought either this is a world of make believe in which case I should walk out and have no more to do with it. But if it is True I must hold nothing back and give my life to it

Confidence in Christ who came, who is with us and who goes before us.

Yes there is much we don't understand not least when we look at the evil and suffering in the world today.

Many of you know I am a fan of and inspired by Studdert Kennedy who was an army chaplain in the first world war and experienced the horrors of the trenches. After the end of the war many church commissioned memorial shrines of 'Christ on the cross' and had them erected outside churches. They are called Calvary's. Kennedy refused to have one placed outside his church in Worcester until there was a radical change. Rather than the head being bowed the head of Christ is erect. For Christ reigns even from a cross

The first part of repenting – being confident – having faith in Christ and yes, Christ crucified and risen and being full of hope. And now the second part of repenting and I suggest this is awareness. Awareness of Christ alive and here active in all life.

I value and enjoy the spirituality inherited from the Celtic branch of the Church. There is something refreshing about it You can almost see the mountains and smell the heather. Particularly I find stimulating the faith that we can be aware of God's activity in our ordinary daily lives .

So for example that very basic almost fun prayer on the incarnation:

Glory to God on earth peace – let this song never cease.

As I arise this morn – Christ in me be born.

When I wash my face – Bless me with your grace.

When I comb my hair – Keep me from despair.

When I put on my clothes – Your presence Lord disclose

This is the day that you are born – Let every day be a Christmas morn

Glory to God on earth peace - Let this song never cease.

I think Paul may have liked that prayer for he was a great believer in all our lives being caught up in Christ and seeking to find expression of that truth in every part of life.

And so let us return to that Letter Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi. And I believe Paul equally would write to us in this Church this morning - and let us not forget the smile on his face as he writes it:

‘God knows how I long for you all with the deep yearning of Christ Jesus himself. And this is my prayer, that your love may grow ever richer in knowledge and insight of every kind, enabling you to learn by experience what things really matter’.

Great stuff! And I believe that this is and should be at the heart of this Church. That our love should grow and we should discover those things that really matter.

For a fascinating example of this let us start at the top – the Pope, Pope Francis. When the Pope was Bishop of Buenos Aires he had a nickname – it was ‘horse face’. This was because he never smiled and his face only lit up when he was talking about his football team – San Lorenzo.

But today he never stops smiling – a great warm beaming smile. He even welcomes people taking selfies with him and will ask the Swiss Guard to take his photograph with tourists. Before he was preparing to retire at 75 - now at 78 he seems ten years younger.

What has happened? For the first time in his life he says he is experiencing inner peace because he feels he had found what really matters. And for him it is ‘people’ – not laws, not doctrine, not discipline but people and something has been released in him and he can’t stop smiling and I being surrounded by people..

So again the prayer of St Paul for each one of us:

‘That your love may grow ever richer, in knowledge and insight of every kind, enabling you to learn by experience what things really matter. ‘

And so to third part of repenting. First Confidence in Christ, Secondly awareness and thirdly being - alert - being awake, for God can do and does surprising things

There’s that wonderful title of the book by the great C.S Lewis – ‘Surprised by joy in which he tells how Christ and faith came to him when he was riding on the upper deck of a bus.

I have talked of Celtic spirituality but there is also our inheritance as Methodists – the spirituality and theology developed by John and Charles Wesley. And at the heart of this theology is a phrase rich with meaning – ‘The Optimism of Grace’ - The belief that God’s grace can break through at any time in any situation.

It can break through in the life of an individual, in the church, or bring compassion and healing to a suffering world - In other words it is the answer to our prayer: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

And God can always surprise us.

One of the great themes of advent is that Christ will come again and we should always be alert -but we know not how or when. Usually the Bible talks of Christ coming again in triumph and glory with a host of angels.

My hero Studdert Kennedy – Woodbine Willy – however dared to think that Christ might surprise us again. As after the first world war he toured the country mixing with people and sharing their hopes and fears – he wrote this take on the second coming.

Then will He come – with meekness for His glory.

God in a workman's jacket as before

Living again the Eternal Gospel Story,

Sweeping the shavings from His workshop floor.

On this day – the second Sunday of Advent we hear the voice of John the Baptist echoing down through the years. Prepare the way of the Lord – 'Repent, Be confident in God.' Repent we aware of Christ active in the world , be aware, be alert for God is full of surprises. Amen.

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