

REFLECTION FOR ADVENT SUNDAY (29.11.2020)

by Revd Paul Timmis

with reference to Isaiah 64: 1-9 & Mark 13: 24-37

I don't know about you but I've had enough of this year now. By and large, I think I've coped reasonably well with all the setbacks and restrictions, but in the last few days I've come to realise that I've now reached the point where I just want to leave this year behind and move on to 2021 when, hopefully, the roll out of a vaccine will allow us to begin to return to the sort of life that, until recently, we took for granted.

Now, I fully appreciate that, to make the most of life, we have to learn to live in the present rather more; that harking back to the past all the time (to what we've known) - or dreaming too much about the future (and all that we hope will be) - will see us fail to see the blessings that are ours in the here and now. And I'm generally more than fine with that as a principle. But it's not wrong to like to be able to look forward to things with a sense of expectation, is it? Who doesn't like to have something in the diary that can be anticipated with a sense of joy? And one of the problems with 2020 has been that way too many of these occasions and events have been scratched off our calendars: postponed or cancelled altogether. Don't get me wrong, compared to the horrendous loss of life and all the untold stories of associated heartache and pain, I appreciate that this is a far lesser issue. But it still affects us.

Ordinarily we enter the season of Advent with any number of events just around the corner - church services, obviously, but also school nativity plays and carol concerts, office parties, drinks with friends, family gatherings, maybe a theatre trip - which, if we're really unlucky, might involve a pantomime. Even if, in the past, we may have approached some of these with a sense of dread, such events have helped to define Christmas for us. All we know at the moment is that Christmas will be different this year. How different it will feel when we get there remains to be seen. But, at the moment, for all the talk of a possible relaxation of restrictions, we know that the virus will still be with us, that it won't respect our traditions and that, as a result, many of these can't and won't take place.

So how do we approach Advent this year - when we don't think that there's all that much look forward to?

Advent, we're continually reminded, is a time of hope and expectation, a time to prepare for the breaking in of a new world order. And as we watch and as we wait, as we look forward in expectation and hope, we join ourselves with those who've gone before us: people who, like us, have looked at the world in which they live with a sense of weariness, uneasiness or even utter despair but people who nonetheless continued to hold on by their finger nails to the belief that the God who'd created all things, the God who'd set people free in the past and journeyed with them through the wilderness, would at some point - and somehow - break into the world again and offer them salvation from all that oppressed them and denied them life.

Take Isaiah. When Isaiah makes his heartfelt plea to God, the people of Israel are in exile, far from the land God promised them. They're a people oppressed by the Babylonians. They're a dislocated and abandoned people, struggling with what it means to be God's people when God is seemingly inactive.

For all this, Isaiah still believes that the God who's acted unexpectedly in the past can do so again. So Isaiah continues to long for God to act in the present. Isaiah clearly aches and longs for this with the whole of his being.

But God doesn't seem to hear the cries of the people and remains silent, so Isaiah begins to wonder why this might be. He starts to blame the people – including himself. Was it something they did which had caused God to grow angry and abandon them? Then he reflects that even if they did wrong, they only sinned because God had already hidden from them.

For Isaiah, the inescapable conclusion is that God has simply withdrawn, and has done so for reasons that human beings can't understand. Yet still – and even with this understanding of God – Isaiah can look to the future with a sense of expectation and can hold on in hope.

In Jesus' day, the people of Israel are again a people struggling and oppressed. By now, of course, they're living in their Promised Land, but that land of freedom has now become a land of captivity. Overwhelmed by the forces of Rome, the dark clouds of occupation have gathered once more and, yet again, the people's view of God has been obliterated.

Against such a backdrop, Jesus offers his disciples a vision of the end times in which everything – including all suffering and violence – is a sign of the coming of God who'll be revealed in the form of the son of man.

‘Power belongs’, Jesus says, ‘not in the realm of human beings where it corrupts and is divisive, but to God alone: God comes in power to reconcile God’s broken creation to God-self. You *can* expect. You *can* hope.’

‘So’, Jesus goes on to say to his followers, ‘just as you attend to nature to tell of the change of times and seasons, so you must be attentive to signs of God’s coming. Don’t just hope, expect. Keep awake.’

Once again 2020 has delivered in spades, it seems. Because, whilst we can have no real idea what life in exile in Babylon over 500 years before Christ was like, and whilst we can have no real clue how life under Roman occupation in first Century Palestine was experienced, living in the time of a pandemic might well have just got us closer than most of us have ever managed before.

Our readings today show how when, over time, any real sense of expectation that things will or can change begins to die, confidence in a God that can or will act to bring about something new may well be dented. And without this very real and tangible sense of expectation or hope, what are the chances of us seeing signs of God living and working among us even if such signs are there?

Advent offers us (offers me) - a timely reminder that we can neither afford to dwell in or on the past nor look too far to the future, we need to be alert to the present. We need to stay awake for God is here, God is with us already and always. With that in mind...

We pray
not only, *Come, O Lord*,
but move us to let you in,
for already you stand at our door knocking,
your presence immediate, urgent, powerful;

not simply *be with us*, our God,
but let us feel your presence with us always,
for you are always here;

not so much *hear our prayer*,
but give us words which resonate
with the energy of your love,
for you are the eternal listener of our souls’ song;

not always *help us*,
but let us learn to see your working in our lives;

not *give us*,
but humble us,
that in our lowliness we may fall no further;

not *protect us*,
but immerse us in life
and let us love and give and learn to follow
the driving, compelling power of your wild Spirit;

not *save us*,
but let us understand that
in the vastness of your universe
you lovingly surround us,
always and completely.
In you alone can we safely lose ourselves
and so find you.
Amen.

Original prayer written by Annie Heppenstall-West and Ray Gaston. Amended to read 'we' not 'I' and 'us' not 'me'.

See Ruth Burgess ed., *Candles and Conifers: Resources for All Saints' and Advent* (Wild Goose Publications, 2005) p127. Used with permission.