

Sermon for Sunday 3 December 2023

First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 64: 1 – 9; I Corinthians 1: 3 – 9; Mark 13: 24 – end

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,” (Isaiah 64:1)

So writes the prophet Isaiah in our first reading today – imploring God who seems to be absent, to come down and sort out his people in their time of distress.

We might well feel the same today in the light of world events. We may feel relatively comfortable here in Woburn Sands. But we know there are many around us needing to use the Food Bank and struggling with heating bills. And we can't avoid the news - the continuing conflict and suffering in the Holy Land; other conflicts around the world; and our apparent inability to work together as a species to look after our common home. Will COP28 make any difference – or is it all just blah blah blah as Greta Thunberg says?

Why doesn't God just come down now and sort it all out?

Our reading from Isaiah speaks into all of this. But first I need to give you a bit of ancient history!

The book of Isaiah spans a long and turbulent period in the history of God's people. In 586 BC Judah was destroyed by Babylonian armies. All of the leaders and many of the people were carried into exile and lived along the banks of the Euphrates surrounded by people who worshipped other gods. They needed the encouragement of prophets like Isaiah to hold on to their faith in God. Fifty years later, in 539 BC Cyrus king of Persia conquered the Babylonian empire. Under his rule, conquered peoples were allowed to live in their own countries and to practise their own religions and cultures. And in 538 BC Cyrus issued an edict allowing the population to return to Judah. Only some of those who had been exiled decided to take the risk of returning home to rebuild in their home country, but they carried the plans with them. The book of Ezra describes how they laid the

foundations for rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 5: 14 – 16). But the prophet Haggai tells us how by around 520 BC things were not going well. (Haggai 1). The people had been busy on other projects and work on the Temple had stalled. This was a time of severe hardship for those who had returned to Judah, and this is when today's prophecy was written. There was division and enmity between rival groups. Civil and religious leaders were concerned only with personal gain and the court system was corrupt. This was a very different picture of what return from exile would be like to the one painted in earlier chapters of Isaiah. So what had gone wrong?

Had God given up on his promises and deserted His people?

The prophet cries out to God on their behalf. Will he not reveal Himself again, by mighty acts as he did in the past? There is no God beside their God who works for those who wait for him. But God is angry with His people, and has withdrawn His favour: Isaiah writes this:

“We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.”

The relationship between God and his people has broken down. The only way back is for the people to acknowledge God as their creator, “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay and you are our potter;” and to repent. If the people turn to the Lord, He will again bless them. They will need to reform their ways, to walk in justice again and become a society which honours God.

It's the usual sad cycle. God has not deserted His people. They have fallen away from His ways, leading Him to withdraw from them. The inevitable suffering that follows is His way of drawing them back again. They need to repent. As we said in that repeated refrain in our Psalm today

“Turn us again, O God, show the light of your countenance and we shall be saved.” (Psalm 80)

Advent is a serious time; sometimes described as a mini-Lent; a time of repentance and waiting. It’s really hard to keep Advent as anything like that in the midst of all of the delightful pre-Christmas distractions. Much easier, as the world would have us do – to focus straight on the baby in the manger. Everyone likes a new baby, especially with some cute animals and a few angels thrown in.

But what the world needs is God, our deeply loving Creator, the one who has already come to us in Jesus the man. Jesus who, our Gospel reading promises, will come again in power and glory at the end of the world to finally bring judgement, justice and righteousness to us all.

So, let us commit ourselves, amidst all the busyness to keep Advent; to remember to stop, to pray for our world and for ourselves.

“Turn us again, O God of hosts, show the light of your countenance and we shall be saved.” (Psalm 80)

Amen

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