

Sunday 17th December 2017

St Mary le Strand

Is. 61.1-4, 8-11; Ps 126; 1 Thess. 5.16-24; John 1.6-8, 19-28

Advent 3

PREPARING FOR GOD'S NEW ADVENT-URE

INTRODUCTION – FOR THE START OF THE SERVICE BEFORE CONFESSION

It's good to be back here, helping with services again. It's been a long journey in our partnership since I became Dean of King's in 1993, in the days of Edward Thompson (a good Kingsman of course) as your Vicar, and suggestions at that time about the Diocese giving St Mary's to King's as a Chapel. Over the decades we have worked together, with King's having used the church for lectures when building work was underway (thank you) and returning the favour with giving space for the St Mary's parish office, and helping with things like robing and processions over your various clergy inductions, supporting the experiments with the Chaplain to the homeless, and with William Gulliford as your priest, sharing the parish area together – especially therefore the Parish Registers, since most of the weddings in the parish actually take place in our Chapel. I sometimes think that I have probably slept within the parish boundaries more nights than anyone else involved here, when I recall late nights in my office across the road! Together with Tim, our Chaplain, I have enjoyed taking services here from time to time over the last two decades in the times when you had no priest (though I'm sorry that we had to stop that when the amount of incense used to inflame my asthma – and thank you for your restraint today!) – and of course, Dr Keith Riglin, another of our Chaplains and my Assistant Dean, is part of your Thursday lunchtime congregation, which I know is a different group from this Sunday congregation, but it is important to involve them too. So we are entering an exciting new period in our already long-standing partnership, as not only Keith helping at the eucharist on Thursdays, but also other members of my team, plus our colleagues from LSE and UCL, help to maintain this Sunday eucharist which I know you value so much. And that's another reason why it is very good to have the Principal of King's, Prof Ed Byrne, and his wife, Melissa, here with us today also, who live probably the closest to this church just across the parish boundary – thank you for this encouragement.

SERMON: PREPARING FOR GOD'S NEW ADVENT-URE

INTRODUCTION

We are of course in the penitential season of Advent, that time of expectant waiting and longing for God to do something new among us. We have just had over a thousand people through our Chapel for our various Advent Carol services by candlelight, with the readings, prayers, hymns and choral anthems, all full of that Advent longing for the coming of God in power and majesty to right wrongs and bring new life. As the old Advent anthem puts it, *expectans expectavi*, repeating the Hebrew way of combining a verb and participle – I am waiting expectantly waiting. So preparing for God's new **Advent-ure** is very much an **Advent** theme – and that's what we are all doing here in St Mary le Strand. This Advent theme of God's **Advent-ure** is there throughout all of today's readings – and thank you to those who read them.

Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-11:

Just listen again to that wonderful promise from Isaiah, today's OT reading:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;
² to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;
³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

He says that God's people will 'build up the ancient ruins' and 'repair the ruined cities', to 'raise up the former devastations, the devastations of many generations' (v. 4). Obviously, I don't want to describe this wonderful old church as an 'ancient ruin' or a 'devastation' – but we all know that it has suffered under many generations, and is not in as good a state of repair as we would all like – which is why we have to find new ways of being a church together which can help fund the necessary repairs and restoration.

But of course, Isaiah also warns us that 'I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing' (v.8) – which is why everything we do must be according to proper justice – and we must avoid wrongdoing at all times if we are to see this new Advent-ure of God happening here, so that those who come after us, our 'descendants and offspring shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed' (v.9). Only then can we expect in Advent expectation that God will 'clothe us with the garments of salvation, the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels' (v. 10). Of course, once again we have to wait, and water the seed and nurture the new growth if we are to see Isaiah's vision be fulfilled, 'as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations' (v. 11).

You see – I told you it was an exciting Advent-ure!

Ps 126

There is a similar theme in the Psalm set for today, Ps. 126, that 'the Lord will restore the fortunes of Zion' and 'do great things for us' (vv. 1, 4), which will make us feel like 'those who dream, our mouth filled with laughter and our tongue with songs of joy' (v.2). There is that same image, so often found in Isaiah, of new life coming out of the dry 'river beds of the desert' – when I studied in Israel-Palestine working on my doctorate, I remember so well the dry river beds where we camped in the desert – but how they could burst into greenery, trees, flowers and fruit as soon as any rain came. So the Psalmist comes to us in our tears and pain and anxiety and reassures us that 'those who sow in tears, shall reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed, will come back with shouts of joy, bearing their sheaves with them' (vv. 6-7).

1 Thess. 5.16-24

Paul also encourages his readers to prepare for God's new Advent-ure, 'the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ', for which we must 'abstain from every form of evil', to keep ourselves 'sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ' as St Paul puts it (5.22-23). But it is not good enough just to avoid

these sins, these negative aspects, if we are to realise God's new dream for us: we have to ¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.' And even more important, he tells us ¹⁹'Do not quench the Spirit.', in other words, Paul says, we must join in with God's new Advent-ure and work with him to see it fulfilled, for ²⁴'The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.' In the end, it is God's job to bring it about, and God's faithfulness to us which will ensure it happens.

John 1.6-8, 19-28

Finally, and most importantly, we come to this towering figure in our gospel reading, John the Baptist – who comes out of that desert, that wilderness, which Isaiah and the Psalmist talked about with its dry riverbeds, yet which they prophesied would find new life. So now, John appears to proclaim the fulfilment of Isaiah's vision – to be 'the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord"' (John 1.23). No wonder that the religious authorities wanted to know who he was, and questioned him about his identity and his mission. But both John the evangelist and John the Baptist (too many Johns here!) agree – it is not about him – and similarly, it is never about us. The gospel writer makes it abundantly clear that the Baptist 'was himself not the light, but he came to testify to the light'; instead he was 'sent from God' to be 'a witness to the light.' (1.6-8). So when he is questioned by the authorities, he reiterates time and time again, 'it's not about me', 'No', 'I am not', brilliantly set of course by Orlando Gibbons for the counter-tenor in his well-known Advent anthem, *This is the Record of John*, which so often forms part of our Advent Carol services. There is another coming, a future 'you do not yet know', and we are 'not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal' (1.26-27). Later in this chapter, John the Baptist redirects his own disciples, like Andrew and Philip, to go and follow Jesus as the Lamb of God, as we celebrated on St Andrew's Day recently. He is not bothered when Jesus starts 'taking his business' as it were, when Jesus and his disciples are getting and baptizing new followers (Jn 3.22-23, 25-26). John is only the 'friend of the bridegroom', the best man if you like, whose job it is to stand by the bridegroom and rejoice when his day comes (3.28-29); finally the Baptist sums it all up in that amazing phrase 'he must increase, but I must decrease' (3.30).

So too for us who are friends of the Advent bridegroom – we are not the light, we are to witness to the light, to make the way straight, to make the preparations for God’s new Advent-ure; we must not cling on to the old days and the old ways, but stand by the bridegroom and rejoice at what he is doing. It is hard, but we must all pray for the grace to be like John, and say ‘he must increase, but we must decrease’ (3.30).

CONCLUSION

So this third Sunday in Advent and its readings are remarkably prescient and relevant to the challenges we are facing here in St Mary le Strand, at King’s and around the Aldwych. I have already stressed it would be unfair to think that this church is a ‘desolation’ – but there have certainly been times of desolation for you all over recent decades, when it has been hard to keep it all going. I know that the faithful service of many of you in this Sunday congregation – and not forgetting the Thursday congregation either – has been hugely important, which I, and all my colleagues at St Matthew’s with Fr Philip and within the university chaplaincies, want to acknowledge. But if we are all to prepare for God’s new Advent-ure together, to stop this church falling into the ‘ruins’ which Isaiah was talking about, we need to work together to find new ways of being church, and new ways of resourcing and funding both the restoration of the church’s building and the rebuilding of the church’s life and worship here.

That’s why I was so pleased with the results of the PCC meeting we had recently, with the unanimous acceptance of the motion proposed by the churchwardens themselves to move forward into this Advent-ure for the temporary licence and the period of experimenting with several and different new ideas and ways forward. As the Diocesan representative said that night, and on other occasions, among various possibilities, this **may – or may not** – include the Museum of the Bible; actually, I do hope we can find a way to experiment with seeing some of their wonderful artefacts and exhibits in London on a temporary basis. Similarly, I also hope that we can find ways of experimenting with a greater partnership with King’s, possibly with lectures, concerts and so forth as well as our Chaplains helping with the services. And then there is all the exciting prospects of the renewal of the whole Aldwych area, restoring the magnificence of Bush House, and the hopes of pedestrianizing some or even all of the roads around this church – and possible cooperation with our friends in Somerset House and the Courtauld.

It is indeed an exciting Advent-ure, a 'new thing' which God is doing in our midst, a 'restoration of our fortunes', raising up what has been 'desolate' and neglected over generations, bringing forth 'new shoots' and opportunities for new growth. If we are to work together with each other and with God himself, then we will need to do so in that 'spirit of gentleness and generosity of spirit' which we all voted for unanimously at the PCC meeting, to abstain from evil and wrong-doing as both Paul and Isaiah instruct us today (1 Thess 5.22; Is. 61.8), speaking to each other in love. In this way, we will be able to say confidently with John the Baptist, 'he must increase, but I must decrease', *we* must decrease. Then, and only then, will we be able to 'prepare the way of the Lord', 'make his paths straight', see the deserted places bloom and blossom, bring new life to the desolation, and rebuild what could otherwise be ruined – in other words not only to look forward to God's new Advent-ure, but to work together with him in bringing it about, not only in this Advent but throughout the years to come.

And now to that same God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ be all might, majesty, dominion and glory, in his church, and in his world, now and for evermore, Amen.

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