

A Sermon for Advent Sunday by Revd. Chris Fletcher

There's a poem by the poet-priest George Herbert that I discovered in lockdown called "The Forerunners". Surely, it's all about prophets of long ago? But No! So, let's read on:

"The harbingers are come. See, see, their mark,  
White is their colour.....and behold, my head!"

White hairs have started to appear. His ageing is preparing him for his King, as he reflects in hope for that new beginning promised daily as one of the signs of things to come. That seems to me to be an appropriate introduction to some thoughts about Advent.

So! Advent comes again-because that's what it says it does. It's double message is well-known. Jesus came (as foretold by prophets long before) and He will come again (as He Himself foretold as another prophet but MORE). As a Church in preparation for the Kingdom of God, we are warned in "The Promise of His Glory" (that helpful liturgical resource compiled 30 years ago) not to get stuck in the "pastness of the past", but to be conscious of a glorious future in all our thinking. But, this year, it is inevitable that there is so much focus on having a "Good Christmas", sharing the hoped-for celebrations expected by large parts of the world as we all come out( for a little while?) of the torment caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Nevertheless, we need to continue looking towards that future-yet-to-come when our trust in God will be validated. So, we light our candles on our Advent wreaths and open the windows in our Advent calendars letting hope and joy invade our senses as we ponder those things not yet seen bringing us close to the prophets of old and to the saints in heaven.

Today, then, we light the first candle or open the first window that we may "see" in our mind's eye and "hear" in our hearts the prophets giving voice to God to his people in distress as well as the Son of God prophesying, promising, telling his disciples( and us) as His life on earth draws to a close to watch everlastingly for the things of the Kingdom WHICH WILL COME!..... Perhaps, even NOW.... He could be standing at the door, knocking, wanting to make everything right as He did in the past.

The flame of the candle begins to flare. The light begins to pour through the window. The harbingers, the forerunners, the heralds COME with hope, their glasses always half-full! The prophets are so close to God that they speak for Him reminding those who will listen of His attitude towards their past behaviour, what is required of them in the present and how they are to act in every future moment- as He did in the past.

"What do prophets say?" I asked sundry schoolchildren in my past. Their reply always was "THUS SAYS THE LORD". They were right but I hoped that they learned more from what followed.

At this time of the year (and no more so than this year) WE need to hear again the words of the prophet Isaiah:

"THUS SAYS THE LORD:

"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people... that their iniquity is pardoned!"

"The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light. Upon them hath the light shined."

"And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed"

These are words spoken to a people returning from years of exile in Babylon who find their city in ruins-a heap of rubble. They are tasked with rebuilding the nation of Israel, for Israel for their God who has saved them. The programme of reconstruction, first the walls and then the temple, is the way of rebuilding a people. (All this is so well told by the prophets Ezra and Nehemiah). In the midst of economic hardship, insecurity of political life and the

burden of continuing shame and guilt, no wonder there are disagreements and jealousies in the leadership. It all sounds a bit familiar. It's the way humans are! It takes a second wave of exiles to re-energise the programme. All that comfort, shining forth, glory predicted earlier in Isaiah, comes about as the story is remembered that their God still seeks to tell them of his love, His longing to forgive their wrongdoings that resulted in their being exiled, and the glories that lie in store, all that is to be accepted ON TRUST. The people lament before their salvation takes flesh-we heard a bit of this today as the prophet (frought and frustrated that it's not all happening) demands of his God

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down and do the things you promised, that no ear has perceived and no eye has seen. Are we not your people?"

Lament is not only a wringing of hands, asking calmly and politely for things to be better, but it can be full of anger, too. Have you ever wondered why some of the psalms have bracketed verses. An editor thought it was unseemly to rail at God, to express anger, not just against neighbour and enemy but also against God, the One who brings justice and righteousness and who doesn't appear to be, even though we are doing our best! The prophets made impassioned pleas at times based upon their trust that God will act.

And in this great story of Israel He does-partially. But the prophets' prophecies will not reach fulfilment until more time has passed-give or take a few hundred years! Until then, the nation must wait. It must WAIT IN TRUST. That is also part of the Advent message when we acknowledge that there must be a better future than the circumstances we are going through.

So the flame on the candle of our Advent wreath burns higher. The window on the Advent Calendar lets in a brighter light. We can meditate on our trust in Jesus, the harbinger, the fore-runner, the prophet (but more), His cup always full to overflowing, full of hope and love, signalling God's Kingdom about to come. Our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. BUT: in spite of the good news of an efficacious vaccine there are many people who are still feeling tremendously perplexed (what Tier governs our behaviour?), some utterly forsaken (in carehomes and lonely at home), others paralysed by the fear of catching the virus or of dying from it, and many others in the depths of despair, their livelihoods in tatters. Being just optimistic and up-beat is only part of the answer, if it's an answer at all. There is a case for lament before God (as those ancient peoples did) and action that comes from it as we mourn for what we have done or what we have not done. Are we not your people, Lord? "Restore us, O lord. Show us the light of your countenance and we shall be saved". It's OK to ask like that in our prayers.

As we pray the Collect for Advent Sunday (and again every day after until Christmas, like we used to), because of the Good News of Jesus Christ, let us pray it in the spirit of lament ready to receive that salvation which is always on offer that we may indeed become trustworthy servants who "cast away the works of darkness and put on the armour of light NOW" and who WATCH and WAIT for that future-yet-to-come, a new heaven and a new earth, held in trust for us-even as our hair grows whiter still!

Readings: Isaiah 64 v.1-9, Ps 80 and Mark 13 v.24-37

Collect for use in your own intercessions

"Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility; that on the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

