

Sermon for 1st December 2024 – Year C – Advent I

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Sermon

The Season of Advent does strange things to our concept of time. For the Church, it is the start of the new year, revisiting the story of Jesus's birth in Bethlehem. But for most people, Advent is at the end of the year, which doesn't conclude until Auld Lang Syne.

Even more confusing: while Christians in Advent are looking forward with longing for a future of justice and righteousness, in secular society, the festive season is more often a time of looking backwards, finding comfort in 'once upon a time' Christmas music, in nostalgia for childhood and family memories.

Advent, considered to be a season of 'waiting', has a very different feel depending on what it is you're waiting for. Are you waiting for the festival of Christmas, for family time, joy to the world, goodwill to all people, presents and parties, a celebration of an event from two thousand and twenty-four years ago? Or are we still waiting for the reality of God's promise in the words of the prophet Jeremiah: "In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land."

Where is that justice and righteousness? Do we really see it in the world around us? Perhaps we feel that despite the the coming of Jesus and the flourishing of the New Testament Churches, justice and righteousness has been lost in dark ages and reformations, renaissance, modernism and post-modernism. In Advent, many of us will have fond memories of wonderful Christmases past, but some of us will also feel that we have never truly seen justice and righteousness in our land – and may despair that we shall ever see it.

The prophets are used to speaking into this despair and trying to inspire hope. Jerusalem's situation in Jeremiah's day was truly dire. The people of Judah had been violating their covenant with God for centuries, and finally the threatened punishment comes in the form of the Babylonian empire, who conquer Jerusalem in 587BC and carry away all the treasures, the royalty, skilled artisans and educated people, desecrating the temple and tearing the people of God away from their city and their faith.

To be fair, Judah's history had been an ever-worsening spiral of wicked self-serving leaders. As we read the Bible, there's never a point where we can truly say, 'Ah, here the people of God are finally everything they were meant to be.' From the time of King David onwards, justice and righteousness were seemingly in decline, rather than flourishing, playing second fiddle to the pursuit of power and wealth. Even King David himself, though called a man after God's own heart, was still deeply flawed, willing to send another man to his death so David could take the man's wife as his own.

Even today, it is not hard for us to taste the kind of despair that Jeremiah's community must have been experiencing. I recently listened to a podcast discussion between two Christians involved in climate activism and social justice. They were reflecting on their own sense of despair that quite possibly, there is nothing at all that anyone can do any more to save the world from catastrophic climate change. And Jane and I have been listening together to an audiobook by theologian Brian McLaren called 'Life after Doom,' in which he explores the growing sense that society is unstoppably fragmenting and failing, and considers how we might live when we feel so powerless to do anything about all the economic, social and environmental problems in the world.

This is what despair really feels like to me – the sense that another world, another way forward – has become not only impossible, but even impossible to imagine. Despair is when you simply can't see any viable way forward.

From this perspective, many Christians feel the power of Advent far more keenly and far more personally than any other season. Lent demands sorrow from us, but we might not feel personally repentant. Easter cries out with resurrection joy, but our own lives may not connect with that at all. Pentecost speaks of the fiery new life of the Spirit, when our own hearts may feel dark and cold. But Advent sings most perfectly in tune with the experience of our present age – a profound longing for a future of justice, mercy, righteousness, and loving community that we have never truly seen and can barely – if at all – imagine.

Advent comes closest to expressing my own state of mind, a constant yearning for a different world that I cannot find the words to describe, but which somehow by faith I know is possible. ‘Maranatha!’ I cry. ‘Come Lord Jesus! O Come, O Come Emmanuel!’

Again, time plays tricks on us. Jesus has already come, and gone, and promised to come again. So, is Advent now merely a memorial for us, a chance to pretend to be shepherds and magi and enjoy the nativity story through the eyes of children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren? I think Advent is the season that calls us – with the prophet Jeremiah – to yearn for a different future, where justice and mercy and righteousness are a present reality in our lives, not just a pious hope, or an imagined memory of decades or centuries past. We live in Advent all year round, longing for something we have never truly known.

We need desperately to engage our imaginations, to try to see exactly what sort of people God is continually calling us to become. We need to hear the prophets’ cry – “another world is possible” – a world we haven’t yet seen – a world for us still to aspire to. Whether we are thirty-five, fifty-five, or eighty-five years old, whether our energy is spent, or still in the first flush of passionate youth, Advent says. “I have a dream! I have a dream today.”

The stories of Advent are not happy childhood favourites with choirs of angels and homely stables, sheep, and donkeys. The stories of Advent are the deepest

most profound human longing from the pits of despair – the destroyed cities and divided families, where sin and cruelty rule and ruin people’s lives, and hope and charity are thin seedlings indeed in the desert.

All the world has a dream of the Kingdom of God, of justice and righteousness throughout the Earth. But how do we build it where we are?

Brian McLaren in ‘Life after Doom’ suggested that even if we understandably lose hope of solving all the problems in the world, we need not lose hope of being good people. We may never see the world become the place of justice and righteousness that we believe it is called to be, and we may be totally unable to imagine how we might even get there, but we can always decide to become people of justice and righteousness within our own hearts, come what may. Whatever may happen in the world out there, within our own hearts the kingdom of God is always coming, and unstoppable.

Advent is our annual reminder that this kingdom, which for now may only be a flickering candle, longs to be a roaring flame. And so it will be.

Despair, while understandable, is never heard from the prophet Jeremiah’s mouth. As Dr Martin Luther King cried out, “With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.” And Jeremiah, that most gloomy of prophets, cries out that God’s Promise cannot ever be defeated.

However you imagine God’s promised kingdom of justice, mercy, and righteousness – and do I hope you spend this season of Advent imagining and yearning for it – the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I *will* fulfil that promise. The kingdom of God is already a seed within you. Amen and Amen, Come Lord Jesus.