

Advent - preparation

Isaiah 40:1-11, Luke 1:1-25

Advent is a time of preparation, a time of preparation for the Christmas celebrations which are just two and a bit weeks away but also a time when Christians around the world focus especially on preparing themselves for the time promised by Jesus himself when he will come again.

Of course, we should live each day as if it were our last, the day when either we will be called to meet our maker or Christ will come again. Just as the Old Testament points time and again to the first coming of Christ so the whole of Scripture promises equally consistently that Christ WILL come again. However, Scripture is equally clear that whilst the place of Christ's first coming was clearly foretold, we won't know either the time or the place of Christ's second coming in advance.

Advent then is the period in the church's year when we focus particularly on both preparing ourselves to celebrate once again the gift of the Christ-child in Bethlehem's stable some 2000 or more years ago AND the promise that Jesus will come again, not this time as a babe laid in a manger but rather as the mighty Lord who will come to draw a line under history and to judge the people of earth.

Both of the passages that we read this evening are part of God's preparation for the coming of Jesus. The first passage from the Book of the prophet Isaiah is perhaps best known from the musical setting to be found in Handel's great oratorio Messiah but, don't worry, I'm not going to attempt to sing it for you this evening!

In this passage, Isaiah proclaims the mercy that God will show to his people and foretells the coming of the Lord. In the first 39 chapters, Isaiah has pronounced with unremitting gloom the Lord's judgement on his rebellious and sinful people but now at the start of chapter 40, the tone changes and we hear afresh of God's mercy, of how, once the hard service of her exile in Jerusalem has been completed, they will be restored.

This restoration will be heralded by the voice of one calling in the desert prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God, a prophecy that would ultimately be fulfilled by John the Baptist whose birth is foretold in the passage that we read from Luke's gospel.

Yet whilst describing the events which will herald the first coming of Jesus, how the one we now know as John the Baptist would prepare the people to receive Jesus, Isaiah is also looking ahead to the time when Christ will come again as he describes how the Sovereign Lord will come with power, and his arm rules for him, his reward is with him and his recompense accompanies him.

The way in which Isaiah can somehow describe events which we now know to be so far separated in time in the same breath can seem puzzling. Isaiah wrote around 700 years before the time of John the Baptist and the events associated with the second coming which he describes in the same breath have yet to take place, almost 3000 years on. Perhaps the easiest way to make sense of this is to imagine that you are looking across a plain at a distant range of mountains through a very powerful telescope or pair of binoculars.

The effect of the lens is to compress the perspective, to make it very difficult to determine the distance separating successive peaks and we have the same phenomenon here but expressed in terms of time rather than distance.

What gives us hope is that as we study the Scriptures we see time and again how God has perfectly fulfilled many of these prophecies. Our passage from Luke's gospel reminds us of how Isaiah's prophecy of the one who was to herald the first coming of the Lord was perfectly fulfilled in John the Baptist.

As we read through the following chapters of the book of Isaiah, we discover how the character of the coming Messiah was so accurately portrayed some 700 years beforehand and we are reminded how Almighty God, the one who is the same yesterday, today and forever, always keeps his promises and in doing so will, one day, come again.

Some might ask why Christ hasn't already come again – indeed this was a problem that the apostle Paul confronted in his letter to the Thessalonians where many believed that such was the imminence of Christ's second coming that they should abandon work and sit around waiting for him to come.

The reality is not that the Lord has forgotten his promise but rather that in his mercy, God has granted us time for many to come to faith, to come to know the Christ child as their Saviour. An oft repeated image of the Saviour is that of the shepherd and it is with this image that Isaiah ends the passage that we read earlier – "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young".

My hope and prayer is that this Christmas-tide many would come to know the true message of Christmas, of the precious Son of God who gave his life at Calvary to pay the price for our sin and who rose again so that we should have life in all its fullness.

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