

## PEACE IN A CHAOTIC WORLD

→ Yes, Advent has arrived! How does it really make you feel when you discover that there are now less than four weeks left to plan the perfect family celebration? How many more visits do you need to make to Handforth Dean or the Trafford Centre or Stockport or the Amazon website or wherever it is that you do your Christmas shopping for all those gifts that are going to be just what everyone wants? How long is your “to-do” list – write Christmas cards, make mince pies, wrap presents, put up Christmas tree, order turkey?

.....Are you looking forward to space and time to be with family and to reflect on the real meaning of this wonderful season of the year or are you facing the coming days with anxiety and frustration because of the bag full of stuff that you know you’ve got to sort out? Are you expecting little other than the same old hassles and problems that you’ve known in previous years as family tensions run high and expectations are dashed? Are you dreading these next few weeks of rushing around and trying to please everyone?

.....So many people desperately seek happiness, peace and perfection in their lives, perhaps most especially at this time of the year. And is it any wonder, because most of the time our lives are cluttered and crowded, our diaries are full, our minds are overloaded with things to remember, our patience is stretched to the limits and all around us are stories of deprivation and violence and poverty and bullying and homelessness and abuse. We so long for things to be different, but many of us have perhaps come to believe that expecting to find those things that we most long for only results in disappointment and rejection.

.....So, is there any point in longing for things to be different? Is it really worth hoping that things might ever be different? Is it just a waste of time to long for peace? Is it pointless to imagine a world and a life for ourselves that feels different from what we experience now? Is it time to break the cycle of longing and hoping which is usually followed by disappointment or do the words of the prophet Isaiah which we have heard this morning have anything to offer us today?

→ These words from the book of Isaiah come from a time of high anxiety, impatience, discouragement, despair and insecurity for God’s people. The powerful nation of Assyria was gobbling up smaller nations and was heading toward an inevitable clash with Israel so the people of Judah had been living under a very real threat of invasion for some time. They were afraid of losing control over more and more of their land. They were surrounded by political infighting and corruption and many of their religious leaders had turned their back on God’s ways and were throwing in their lot with other nations in order to fight against Assyria.

.....The Judeans’ idea of what it meant to be truly safe was to have your own bit of land where you could grow crops, vines, olives and fig trees and enjoy the fruit of them year after year without being afraid that anyone was going to come and take that land away from you, or trample over it and damage it. That vision was definitely under threat and so it’s into that scenario of fear that Isaiah speaks and offers a vision of hope; a vision of total and utter peace!

.....God’s people simply were not seeing the reality of God’s presence and guidance with them every day. For them it was a case of the same old, same old! No real change, no real hope, just a huge collective sigh rang out amongst them all as they anticipated

more of the same misery. They had somehow lost hope of sensing God's presence amongst them. They had lost sight of the promises God had made to them.

.....And perhaps some of us feel much the same way as we consider our own situations on this first Sunday in Advent. The news is still full of turmoil in the Middle East and many other parts of the world. We too are weary of stories of corruption and bad practice amongst our leaders. We witness and also experience broken families, redundancy, financial hardship, illness and bereavement. Some of us feel left out, let down by our friends, disappointed by the behaviour of others or simply angry at the way things are and we're looking for some comfort and some hope amidst it all. Is there hope? Can we find peace? Will things ever be different?

→ The answer, the Advent answer, is a resounding "Yes!" Isaiah saw and understood God's promise as God enabled Isaiah to see beyond the corruption and the desolation that surrounded him. God enabled Isaiah to see a new reality, God's reality in which the people's understanding of the world and of life was being turned upside down and inside out. It was as if God was saying to them, through Isaiah, in the opening verse of this chapter "You ain't seen nothing, yet!" And then Isaiah carries on and unfolds the future for all God's people, including us.

.....In the Hebrew language, which is the language of the Old Testament, God's word isn't just a good idea or a collection of letters, but God's word is an object, a thing, a power that can be seen and experienced. And in these opening words, "In the days to come," or "In the lat days" is a sure and certain promise from God that isn't just made to the people of Israel, nor to you and me, but to all God's people everywhere and in every time. Can you see it? Are you looking beyond what is right in front of your eyes to what God has promised to all those of us who will trust him?

.....First of all there is a promise of peace. Isaiah pictures a time when there will be peace among people; when weapons of war will be turned into useful tools and people won't even think about treating each other badly. When Isaiah spoke those words war was imminent for the people of Israel and through all the years that have followed war has been part of the human race's daily existence. Still today we wake up each day to the news of war somewhere in our world and in our own lives we see unrest within our communities, we experience disharmony in our families and we lack peace in our own being. Yet, in God's time, with God's promise, peace will be a reality Isaiah says. Is it time yet?

.....Well, yes it is! This promise of God is being, has been and will be fulfilled for us because Christ the Prince of Peace has come – that's what we will celebrate at Christmas. He will come – that's what we look forward to during Advent and he is coming now – every day we can know his peace in our lives. Isaiah said, "The Lord's teaching comes from Jerusalem." The Word of the Lord, Jesus himself, became like us and lived here among us. The Word of the Lord, God's word of peace, suffered and died on a cross for you, for us, for all people and now through the power of the Holy Spirit reaches out to all people everywhere.

.....Many of us still long for a time and a space that is free from the stress and anxiety of daily living. We began by acknowledging that this month of December and the build up to Christmas that we experience during this season of Advent, often brings with it family tensions and financial stress and general chaos. And the result of that is that little every day niggles that we wouldn't notice most of the time suddenly grow bigger and stronger in our minds and take over our lives

.....And yet it is time – God’s time. The days to come which Isaiah promised are here because Christ has come and Christ is coming and Christ will come again. So what does that mean for us in our everyday lives?

→ Well, in this season of Advent we have opportunity to remember that Christ has come but we are also invited to prepare for his coming again. Isaiah encourages us to do that by walking in the light of the Lord – in other words by living in such a way that we constantly remind ourselves of God’s presence and activity in our lives and as we do that we can experience the hope and the peace which God promises to us.

.....It’s really easy in the busyness of our days to end the day feeling exhausted, perhaps even fed up and with our minds full of all the things that haven’t gone our way during the day; all the things that have been difficult. And the result of that is a restless mind that starts to fret about whether the next day will be just the same. But we could do it differently couldn’t we? Now, please don’t think I’m suggesting that we’ve got it completely right in our house – far from it! But, over the years of our married life, Leslie and I have tried hard to find time to pray together at the end of each day. We don’t always manage it, but we try! And part of what we do when we pray together is reflect on the day that we have just journeyed through. Some times those days have been full of wonderful experiences that it’s easy to be thankful for. On other occasions they are full of tough conversations and experiences that we would have preferred to avoid. But, as you reflect on the day, you can usually find examples of where God has been present and where God has given guidance and where God has given strength even in the middle of the mess. Christ has come, Christ is coming, Christ will come again. The hope and the peace that he brings can be ours even in the middle of all the mess and stress of our daily living and we are on our way to a time when that peace will be our constant experience if we continue to live in the light of the Lord.

..... The shops and the adverts and the calendars are a constant reminder to us of just how much there is to be done in what little time there is left of the countdown to Christmas. It feels as if there can’t possibly be enough time to do all that we need to do and if we focus on that, then peace goes out the window and chaos reigns! But the most important thing we can do in this Advent season is refocus on Christ who has come, is coming and will come again. The days to come have already begun – hope and peace can be ours now!

.....If the writer of Isaiah were writing to us today, he may say something like this, “In days to come, the way of the cross will be seen as the highest expression of what it means to be human, so that all kinds of people will be drawn to this way of life. Religious hatred and oppression will cease. Everywhere people will be intrigued and will want to learn more about the teachings that lie at the heart of the life of the church. The communities of the faithful will provide a blueprint for all human society. So, come let us live each day as true followers of Christ.” May we be amongst those followers of Jesus that experience the hope and peace he came to bring and in so doing help others to find it to amidst the chaos and mess of their lives.