

Tear Heaven Open*Isaiah 64:1-9*

As these strange, painful times in our world continue, I get the feeling that many people are crying out in anger, in anguish, in desperation for the world to change. The growing desire for someone, something, somehow, somewhere to ride into view, like a mighty, shining knight in armour, astride a powerful war horse, and charge through and smash up everything that ails our world at the moment, and set everything to rights, and save us.

We pin our hopes on a Covid vaccine. We pin our hopes on a few ambiguous days around Christmas, that might give some a breathing space. We pin our hopes on a political or economic or scientific or religious leader who will not only **say** the right thing but **do** the right thing and fix everything and sort it all out on our behalf. Job done. Good night. Amen.

This season of Advent, this time that prepares us for the coming of the Christ-child, begins with a prayer from the prophet Isaiah. It is both a lament and a plea.ⁱ Contrary to the manner in which it is often celebrated in many churches, Advent begins not on a note of joy, but of despair. In our reading humanity has reached the end of its rope. All our schemes for self-improvement, for extricating ourselves from the traps we have set for ourselves, have come to nothing. We realise at the deepest level of our being that we cannot save ourselves, and that, apart from the intervention of God, we are totally and irretrievably lost.ⁱⁱ

Well that's cheery! That's been one of the recurring things that people have said to me over the last few months. We need some good news. We need brighter hymns and music in the services. We need sermons and prayers that lift us up. I am writing a report for next year's General Assembly with a group of colleagues, and one of them, and I am **so** grateful to her, wrote about the wider Church:

There is still a greatness in our Church, not because of the glories of the past, but because of the glories of our Jesus Christ and His message of faith to be lived out, hope to be given, and love to be put into practice. Good work, even in this time of crisis, has continued, but

we do need to CHEER UP and seek today's possibilities which will encourage us to focus not on what we can no longer do, but rather on what we can do, and continue to do.

It was the 'CHEER UP' bit that struck me. In the face of our reading this morning from a prophet writing to a desperate people living in desperate times at least as desperate as the ones we live through today, I found myself confronted again by what this season of Advent, in 2020, might actually be about. It might actually be about a deep sense of desperation about a situation still out of control. But it might also be a bold and confident trust in God Who will come, and will help, and will get alongside us, if we will allow it and prepare for it.

Life without God is unbearable. That is the present tense. Life with God can be completely transformed. That is the urgent hope of the words of Isaiah.ⁱⁱⁱ

"O that Thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down". O that You would tear heaven open, not simply to come down and save Your weary, perplexed, downcast, longing people; but that they, we, would **see** You: our God. God in action. God in judgement. God in saving grace. God in love. This God Who so often seems so far from us, to tear open the skin of heaven like a bright light, like a shining hope, and break through the cage of the clouds so that we who suffer and wait and long and despair might have hope and be set free from the darkness and the heaviness and the gloominess of this time.

Is there anything holding God back? Well yes, says Isaiah. And lowering his prophetic voice he urges the people who read and hear his words to look at themselves. They are not ready for God. We are not ready for God. Our behaviour, our words, our actions on many occasions do not show that the way we treat others shows much sign of the faith we are supposed to demonstrate. It is not the heavens that block our vision of God; it is the way we behave that does.

Uncomfortable? All right, let's point at others and their bad ways. Bullying and shouting and swearing in one of the highest Government offices of our land, somehow slithered out of by those who know a code of behaviour but turn away from it. That would block your vision of God. Speaking about a political aspiration for the future of Scotland, in the midst of a pandemic and with an economic recession alongside a crisis of loneliness and isolation. That would block your

vision of God. Cutting aid to some of the poorest people in our world, and breaking promises of support with only the vaguest of words about when that aid might be restored. That would block your vision of God. Clinging to your power and position and lying about what seems pretty clear to be your people's decision to remove you from office. That would block your vision of God too. It's a relief to point our fingers at others. "Look at how bad they are. Look at how awful they are. Tut tut, tsk tsk."

Until we look at ourselves: what we've thought this last week, or failed to think. What we've said this last week, or failed to say. What we've done this last week, or failed to do. Does that block our vision of God too? Is that sharp-eyed, sharper-mouthed prophet Isaiah saying something so incredibly unsettling: that God may have forgotten us altogether, because of who we are?

Advent begins with a shake-up, a reality call. We are called, none too gently, to think about what we have been, and what we might yet, with God's guiding hands, become. "We are the clay; You are the potter." Yes, we're not right, yes, we are broken. Shall we be saved? Will there be hope? We wait, we wonder. Will this hidden God behind the clouds act?

God will have a part in this coming time; and so will we. A commentator notes that (our) country has changed over the past years from one that wanted to **be** good to one that wants to **feel** good. Let's get the Christmas tree up early; let's switch the lights on; let's buy lots of presents so that we might Christmas-paper over the cracks of our broken-hearted world and find some sort of fulfilment and happiness.

We cannot create the peace we long for by distracting ourselves in such ways. That peace will only come when we turn to God, long for God, wait for God, hope for God. Isaiah says, "No eye has seen any God besides You, Who works for those who wait for Him. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember You in Your ways."

As we long for heaven to be torn open, and for God to come, which is what Advent is all about, it begins with us looking long and hard at what we are and who we have become. Are we willing to face up to the failings and the brokenness? Are we faithful enough to plead with God not to hold a grudge forever? Are we determined to see this God Who will be visible when heaven is torn

open, and realise that the time of waiting is ending, and the time of action in our lives, and in the life of our world, has come again? God's reckless love for God's wayward children finding its way into our hearts and the heart of our world.

I miss singing our hymns so much, and I will particularly miss singing our closing hymn today. Its words perfectly capture that great mixed emotion of Advent: the longing, the mourning, the loneliness, the gloomy clouds, the shadow of death, **and** the coming of God, tearing the clouds apart. Repent, but CHEER UP!

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel,

Shall come to thee

Shall come. To you, to me, to everyone.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Patricia E de Jong, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 1, p2

ⁱⁱ Brueggemann, Cousa, Gaventa, Newsome, Texts for Preaching, Year B, p1

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p2