

Morningside Sermon 10.30am 3/12/23

Communion Advent

Keep awake

Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

"The season of Advent is a time when the church is reminded to wait and prepare for the coming of the Messiah. Advent is projected from our pulpits as a time of new hope and new birth, when the Christ Child is born into our world and ultimately into our hearts. Words of assurance abound amid the promises that God will come again."ⁱ

Why is it, then, that both our readings from Isaiah and Mark have a much edgier, discordant tones? Isaiah's words are a cry for pain seeking understanding, written at a time of disorientation in the time of ancient Israel, held captive in Babylon. An echo for Israelis and Palestinians today in the land we call holy but continues unholy. We heard of the shameful abduction of Israeli and foreign nationals by Hamas. In a single day, 859 Israeli civilians and at least 348 Israeli soldiers and policemen were killed in nearby towns, kibbutzim, military bases and at a music festival near Re'im. Around 250 Israeli civilians and soldiers were taken as hostages to the Gaza Strip, of which the number of kidnapped children is about 30.

I suspect only a few will know that in April 2022, there were 4,450 Palestinian security prisoners in Israeli prisons – including 160 children, 32 women, and 530 "administrative detainees" (incarcerated without charge). Since Hamas' attack on 7th October, between 4,000 and 5,000 Palestinians working in Israel who were attempting to flee have gone missing, having been detained by the Israeli government. Released Palestinians have alleged being blindfolded with their hands and feet tied and later being beaten by Israeli forces, who withheld food, water, and medical supplies.

Isaiah's message may seem too harsh when some will want to focus on overcoming hopelessness by shining the spotlight on the manger. Yet the season of Advent has always held in tension the combination of God's judgement and God's promise. If we want to shine light we need to see into the darkness it illuminates, and it won't be pretty. It may be the ruined horror of Gaza, or the broken homes of southern Israeli families bereft of children, fathers, mothers, friends. Or the murky corridors of Holyrood and Westminster where stories of ineptitude, or downright deceit, or paddling around the shallow-end of morality by some, not all, but some of those elected to represent us and govern us with integrity, honesty and a priority for the common weal. In every political party. And in the lower reaches of journalism where gossip and speculation and a desire to provoke an argument have taken the place in many, if not all, levels of journalism.

Add to the darkness the ongoing financial squeeze, disproportionately crippling the poorest in our society. The scandal of homelessness in our city and our country. An estimated 58 homeless people died on the streets of Edinburgh last year, the worst rate per head of population in Scotland. And this just weeks after Edinburgh declared a housing emergency because of the growing numbers of homeless people, shortage of accommodation, and soaring rents.

It feels as if we're besieged by ugliness-corruption, bigotry, hatred, conflict, and war. It is hard to remember the loveliness of our lives. How can we sing about peace, joy, faith and hope now?

Maybe we shouldn't be reading the Old Testament at Advent. Let's hop and skip on to the New Testament. Jesus will have something comforting to tell us and cheer us up, and we will go from minor key misery to major key rejoicing. Not much hope of that this morning. Those who assigned these readings for the beginning of Advent seem to have been following the advice of the epic film maker, Cecil B De Mille: "Start with an earthquake, then build to a climax."ⁱⁱ In the passage from Mark's Gospel, called by scholars the 'Little Apocalypse', the readers of the Gospel, in around

C70AD, would have been in no doubt that it was a commentary on the ongoing Jewish revolt against Roman rule that ended in the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple; eerily echoing the fate of C7th BC Jews in the time of Isaiah. Jesus, sitting on the Mount of Olives, overlooking Jerusalem, prophesied its downfall. It's possibly the most difficult chapter in the New Testament.ⁱⁱⁱ As we sit, waiting for the prettiness, we think, of Christmas, Advent bounces in these spiky readings to shake us up, and make us look, and think, and question and wonder. Not trying to work out if the current frightening portents in the news are signs of the end of the world. That's not our call. Rather, could this be another wake-up call to a world at turns sleepy with commercialism, or selfishness, or filled with a despairing fatigue at the awfulness of the news? Not predicting the end of time; that will come when God is ready. But rather, asking of ourselves, here and now, are *we* ready?

Ready for what? For the return of Jesus. Not some distant, unspecific date, but right now. To be living right now as if Jesus is going to walk in from Braid Road, up the steps, and into the church. Or maybe He'll slip in through the Cluny Gardens entrance, and open that door right there, and stand at the foot of the pulpit steps, looking. Can you imagine?

A few weeks ago I quoted the saying, 'Jesus is coming, look busy!' I don't think we need to wait. Jesus is here. What Advent does, what these tricky readings from Isaiah and Mark do, what the hymns we are singing this morning do, what the introit and anthem do, is to say to us collectively, with Jesus, 'Keep awake!'

"O Radiant Dawn, splendour of eternal Light, Sun of Justice, come, shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death." The Advent communion anthem from Handel's Messiah, quoting Isaiah, as we share bread and wine: *"And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."* After a short introduction,

the altos will begin to unravel the melody. The other voices will begin to answer the altos and then each other, building a rich texture of sound until Handel brings the voices together, singing the last affirming line to create a well-rounded finale chord: *"for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."* No pressure on the choir!

Our communion hymn, that great traditional metrical Psalm within the Church of Scotland liturgy, *'Ye gates, lift up your heads on high, ye doors that last for aye, be lifted up, that so the King of glory enter may...'* Our closing hymn, *"Lo! He comes with clouds descending, Christ, the Lamb for sinners slain...God appears on earth to reign!"* All, all point to the need to be ready, to be watchful, to be awake. Not in the future, but now. Our Jesus is around us, around the world, now.

"You often see, in paintings of the Nativity by the masters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a background of over-grown ruins, a world fallen apart. Christ's birth takes place in the context of a landscape of loss, destruction, haunted and half-forgotten stones. And as Christmas approaches that image may resonate a bit for some of us. There, still, is the Holy Family, the figures of the story..."^{iv} Christ among the ruins.

Where would He be born today, the One for Whom we wait and long? The shattered rubble of Gaza, where few stones now stand one upon another? A refugee camp on the cold, northern shores of France, waiting for a small boat to cross the Channel, and into the further ruins of British immigration policy? A doorway in the city centre of Edinburgh on this freezing December night? Keep awake. This weak, persistent, demanding Jesus is coming, is already here. Amidst the ruins of our hopes and dreams, our fears and nightmares. In the hospital waiting rooms and at the foodbanks. At dementia friendly-concerts and Christmas tree festivals. Amongst the children, and with the busy working adults, and in the lives of our retired people. At a Presbytery meeting, or a Kirk Session, or a school nativity play.

Are we awake enough, just enough, to see Jesus here now. God hidden in human form. Coming to judge and forgive. Coming enter our darkness with His light. Coming to sit with us when we're frustrated and angry. Coming to stand with us when we work for His Kingdom making a difference that helps. Coming to our Communion, and our songs.

Keep awake!

He's here!

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

Amen

ⁱ Donald Booz, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 1*, p3

ⁱⁱ Martin B Copenhaver, *ibid*, p21

ⁱⁱⁱ Professor William Barclay

^{iv} Rowan Williams, 'Inhabiting the ruins', in *Darkness Yielding*, p14