

Sunday 30th November 2014 Grahamstown Cathedral 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		ADVENT 1 – Year B World AIDS Day 16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence 25th Nov – 10th Dec
Isaiah 64:1-9	Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19	1 Corinthians 1:3-9
		Mark 13:24-37
LET US LIVE IN EXPECTANCY AND HOPE		

“Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the time will come.... I say to you all, keep awake.” (Mark 13:33, 37)

I hope you will keep awake during this sermon!

Advent Sunday

We are in the 16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence (25th Nov – 10th Dec) with December 10th being International Human Rights Day; today is AIDS Awareness Sunday, with World AIDS Day tomorrow, 1st December. And today is Advent Sunday, the 1st Sunday in Advent, with just over four weeks to Christmas. The word “advent” means “coming” or “arrival”. We mark these weeks of Advent as a season and an opportunity to prepare for the coming, the arrival, of Jesus Christ – his birth, his coming into the world at Christmas; and his coming again as Lord and King and Judge at the end of time.

Advent Sunday is also the start of the church’s new year. Our liturgical church calendar goes back to the beginning today. Like any new year, this is a time when we look back and reflect over all that has taken place; and we look forward to what lies ahead, with anticipation and hope.

This is a time to prepare. We may be preparing our homes for the arrival of family at Christmas time. This is also a time to prepare our lives, our hearts, for the new birth of Christ, the new life and new hope that is given to us at Christmas. And it is a time to prepare, to be ready, for the coming of the Son of Man, the coming of the Lord, into

our lives, into our world; a time when we are invited to live in expectancy and hope.

The season of Advent has special symbols - things we can see and touch - that remind us of the significance of this time in the life of the church. We use the liturgical colour purple – the colour that represents both penitence or repentance, and also royalty – so we hold together the double themes of preparing ourselves by turning from all that is wrong, and of giving honour to the coming King.

We have the Advent wreath, with its circle of greenery, as a sign of new life and growth and hope; and its four purple candles, one for each Sunday in Advent, and its white candle, for Christmas Eve, as a sign of the light of God during this period of waiting, as we begin again with the story of our redemption. The light of Christ comes into the darkest parts of our lives, to bring newness and hope for the future.

This is a time when we look forward to the coming of Christ into our lives and our world, once again; and we wait in hope and expectation for what God will do, for doors that we trust will open, for the kingdom of God to come, for the will of God to be done in new and perhaps unexpected ways. Advent points us to a time of upheaval, turmoil, change; as well as new possibilities, expecting the unexpected.

Live in expectancy and hope

Our scripture readings underline this call to live in expectancy and hope, and give voice to our longing. They disturb us. They call us to keep alert, to keep awake, to watch, to be ready.

Our reading from the prophet Isaiah speaks words of call, longing, hope, in the midst of despair, as the prophet calls out to God who seems to be silent, absent, distant.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down... so that the mountains would quake,... the nations tremble at your presence (64:1f.)

This cry and call to God to act is underlined by the psalm:

“O Lord God of hosts: how long will you be angry at your people’s prayer? You have fed them with the bread of tears: and given them tears to drink in good measure.” (80:4-5)

“Restore us again O Lord of hosts: show us the light of your countenance and we shall be saved.” (80:3, 7, 19) – the refrain, the chorus, that is repeated, sung over and over again: Lord, help us. It is significant that the answer to despair is not to turn away from God, but to call on God, to wait on God, to look to God for deliverance and help.

A promise of God’s presence:

“[God] will strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful...” (1 Cor 1:8-9a)

From the Gospel: the collapse and destruction of the sun, the moon, the stars, the powers (13:24) – perhaps a great natural cataclysm, or a great upheaval in the world order, when the powers and forces and authorities – “the sun and the moon and the stars” – are overthrown, come tumbling down.

Jesus is speaking of the return of the Son of Man, the gathering of the elect, and He says these words, puzzling for us, centuries later: “this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place” (Mk 13:30) – did those first disciples, the early church, believe that the end would come and Christ would return within their life time?

It means that Christ comes, here and now, within our life-time, each day, in our joys and sorrows and delights and despairs – and we must

have eyes to see – but that Christ is still to come, the kingdom of God is amongst us and is still to come in all its fullness.

It means that in the face of so much that spells despair and futility, we are to be people of hope. We are to live in expectancy that Christ will come, expecting to see signs of the presence of Christ amongst us. We tend to gloom and hopelessness; the place of faith is not to ignore that reality and to pretend that all is well; but to look, with eyes open, to watch, to be awake, to wait, to be open to the work of God, the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the grace of the Lord Jesus to shape us and to help us to find a way forward.

Advent - looking back, looking forward

What has this year meant for you and me? For us as a Cathedral? As the community of Grahamstown? How has God been present to us, in all that has happened?

This past Friday was the occasion of the High Court Jubilee, 150 years of the High Court here in Grahamstown; a time of thanksgiving with the procession of the judges and lawyers to the cathedral for a thanksgiving service; but also a thanksgiving for the teamwork and unity of this community that resulted in the decision being made to retain the seat of the High Court here, and not move it to Bhisho. The unity and teamwork was a sign of the presence of God. Last weekend was the celebration of the diocesan 160th anniversary, and the energy, vision, faith and commitment of those who planted the church, spread the gospel, extended the kingdom of God, during these years. A sign of the presence of God.

There have been deaths, sadness, sorrows, loss; there have been achievements, successes, births, celebrations. Our life as the Cathedral has been marked by great acts of worship, love for one another, care for those in need. God is wonderfully present in our life here together.

As a community, Grahamstown is in a state of crisis, with our municipality under administration, an unemployment rate of 60%,

way above the national average; and roads, water, rubbish removal and electricity all showing signs of strain, an administrator, Pamela Yako, appointed at vast cost to sort things out. We give her our support in her efforts to address the challenges she and we all face. Yet I often find myself defending Grahamstown to people from outside, and assuring them that we are not the only town with problems, and that this continues to be a good place to be, with opportunities that are unique. God is wonderfully present in the relationships that we have across boundaries, in the networking that is offered, in the small efforts that make a big difference – like the Music Access Project initiated by Gareth Walwyn and Shiloh March, or the work done by Dr Carol Hofmeyer with the Keiskamma Art Project in Hamburg, or the immensely creative programs of worship and reflection and witness offered by Spiritfest, year after year. Thank you Maggy Clarke. Or the Holiday Club, initiated by Wayne van Rooyen and continued this year by Paul Daniels, with the wonderful help of our Mothers Union. The presence of God amongst us.

Speaking personally, Claire and I enjoy immensely seeing our darling daughters grow and flourish, and we are deeply thankful for that, and for all around us here who show us such love and support, those who are like second parents to our girls, those who encourage us and uphold us. I have had a very special few months with my mother here in Grahamstown, followed by her death last in mid-October. Her presence just up the road from us, for those months, was such a happy time for me. The presence of God, through the love those close to us.

This year has also been a year of achievement and success, with our wonderful school pupils and choristers and altar servers and students who bring life and delight to us all, with their energy and achievements and honours badges and awards, and pictures in Grocotts; and we are again saying goodbye to many wonderful youngsters that have spent formative years here with us, and are now spreading their wings and heading off for the next stage in their lives. The presence of God is seen in the creativity and energy of our teenagers and children – such a gift.

This past weekend saw the relaunch of the South African Council of Churches, such a key organisation in the days before 1994, the voice of the church, prophetic presence, yet sadly in some decline since then, and over-shadowed by church groupings that are far more compliant to the current government. The revival of the SACC, with Methodist Presiding Bishop Siwa as President, with Fr Michael Lapsley as deputy, is a sign for good, the presence of God in our national life, as the church once again speaks truth to power.

These past months have also seen the terror and fear and horror being experienced by many under the thumb of radical fundamentalist Islamic grouping, Islamic State, with their oppression and persecution of Christians.

More locally, I am also aware of many who carry immensely heavy loads, and growing levels of stress on key people. Things seem to be getting harder, not easier; the demands and loads continue to grow. Wonderful things have happened, but I see what it has cost to make them happen, the cost to individuals, the drain on our resources, the demands and expectations, the sense at times of being on a treadmill, the futility, the despair, people saying to me “I can’t keep going any longer” – then I do worry, and I do ask and wonder where is God.

As we celebrate the life of our diocese, with so much that is life-giving, life-changing, we are also aware of the huge financial challenges and problems that are out there. Our Parliament is in turmoil, with the President declaring that he is not accountable to Parliament. We are in the 16 Days, as Nickie Turner deals with a number of child rape cases; we acknowledge AIDS Awareness Sunday. God is present in our compassion and our anger and our action.

So it is good that we have come to the end of this year in our journey and life of faith, so that the season of Advent can provide an opportunity to wait on God, to look forward with expectation and hope, to have the eyes of our hearts opened, to dream dreams and to see visions. Advent is a time when our longings are given shape in

scripture and liturgy and prayer, Advent is a time when we are invited to wait upon God, to offer to God our hopes, our despair, our dreams, our questions.

One question that is current on facebook, posted by an altar server from another diocese, which has evoked an immense amount of debate: “I am an Anglican Altar Server; I am four weeks pregnant. Should I have an abortion or not?”

We take our questions, these questions, to God.

Advent comes to remind us of God’s reality and presence – Advent sounds the call to live in expectancy and hope – hope for the coming kingdom, hope for the coming of Christ, hope for God to break into our world.

CONCLUSION

We bring to God, during this Advent, our longings, our deep disappointments; closed doors, bitterness and sadness, betrayals and broken promises, dead ends; we bring to God all who live with suffering and despair and hopelessness; we bring to God all who live with the cry in their hearts, “How long, O Lord?” Let’s allow our worship during this season of Advent to be a celebration of hope, of new life, of new possibilities, new beginnings. Let’s look for the potential and promise in others, even when they disappoint us. And let’s commit ourselves to bringing hope into the world.