

Sunday 13th December 2015 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		3rd Sunday of Advent - Year C Reconciliation Sunday Ember Day
Zeph 3:14-20	Isaiah 12:2-6	Philippians 4:4-7
		Luke 3:7-18
Hope, prayer, crisis		

“In this and many other ways he [John the Baptist] made his appeal to the people and announced the good news.” (Luke 3:18)

ADVENT, A TIME FOR HOPE

We are well into the season of Advent. The word “Advent” means “arrival” or “coming”. This is the time when we look forward and prepare ourselves for the coming of the King, the birth of Christ, and his final return at the end of the world.

Advent is a time of expectancy, a time of anticipation, a time of hope, a time of waiting. The liturgical colour is purple – a colour of prayerful penitence, as we prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ at Christmas; and also the colour of royalty, as we look forward to the coming of Christ as King.

The Advent wreath and candles which we light each Sunday during Advent, are quiet symbols of hope, light in the darkness, the coming dawn, mystery and wonder and revelation just around the corner.

There is a gentle rhythm to Advent – these four weeks of waiting, expectancy, looking forward to the coming of Christ as a baby at Christmas; but also looking, waiting, for the coming of Christ in our daily lives, every day, amongst us.

Advent is a deliberate contrast to the hectic pace as everyone prepares for the “festive season”, holidays, end of year parties.

There are times – and in many ways this is such a time – when we see destruction and despair all around us, and we long quite desperately for things to be different. For change. Perhaps we long for a new

world; a peaceful community; perhaps we are longing for relationships within our families to be healed and restored. Perhaps we are longing for doors to open, for things to shift, for the logjam of conflict and misunderstanding to break free.

Advent is the season in the church's year that gives voice to our deepest longings. We find in scripture, in the liturgy, these life-giving themes of hope and renewal, the promise of God's love to sustain us, a way forward through the turmoil, an anchor of stability in the midst of the storms, signs of life, an invitation to watch and wait for the Spirit of God, a call to discern the signs of the times, to have eyes and hearts open – and to be ready to respond to the opportunities that God gives us, quite unexpectedly.

In the words of the Proper Preface which we use in the Eucharist, during Advent:

“And now we give you thanks because the day of our deliverance has dawned, and through him you will make all things new, as he comes in power and triumph to judge the world.”¹

Advent is a time for hope.

SCRIPTURES

Our scripture readings invite us into this place of hope.

Zephaniah 3:14-20

After destruction comes the promise of restoration.

“... the Lord is among you as king... The Lord your God is in your midst... [he] will keep you safe. He will rejoice over you and be glad; he will show you his love once more... I shall win you renown and praise among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes.” (Zeph 3:14, 17, 20)

¹ *An Anglican Prayer Book 1989*, pg 134 # 103

Immensely comforting words for us all; words that speak of hope; of God who will be with us, who will restore and save and protect.

This prophecy was given to the people of Israel at a particular time in their history: a promise of restoration after a time of military defeat and great destruction.

It is a word of good news in the midst of all the bad news.

Perhaps it speaks to us as well, of a specific time in our lives, for our families, for us as the Cathedral, for us here in Grahamstown. We may have come through a season of desolation and destruction; now is the season of restoration and rebuilding. Perhaps this is an invitation to expect and look for signs of God's love and grace in the midst of destruction. And perhaps it is a more general word of God's grace and hope to us all as sinners; God's grace that is poured out to restore lives that have been broken. We have lost the plot, we have missed the mark, we have wandered from the way. God's grace and love is given to bring us back.

Philippians 4:4-7

The call to prayer, and the promise of peace:

“... in everything make your requests known to God in prayer and petition, with thanksgiving.” (Phil 4:6)

“Then the peace of God, which is beyond all understanding, will guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 4:7)

As Archbishop Justin wrote recently,

“The renewal of prayer is my highest priority – in myself constantly and in the church – because it's the only way we're conformed to the likeness of God, and united with one another. If we pray together it's

harder to divide and harder to despair. A church that prays will find renewal because it finds the reality of God.”²

#justpray advert youtube clip – from the Church of England³.

So the word for today is an invitation to pray, to rejoice, to intercede, to bring all our petitions and concerns to God, with thanksgiving.

Luke 3:7-18

The gospel reading is very different. From words of hope we move to words of challenge, provocation, a radical call to repentance and to change our ways. John the Baptist came announcing the good news to the people (Lk 3:18), but the words he spoke were not easy, comfortable words; the good news he spoke was radical, hard to hear, challenging: sharing food and clothing with those who had none; harsh, scathing words: You bunch of snakes! Vipers brood! Prove your repentance by the fruit you bear...” Words of warning – the axe is laid to the roots of the trees; and every tree that fails to produce good fruit is cut down and thrown on the fire.” (Lk 3:7-9)

BEING PEOPLE OF GOOD NEWS AND HOPE

Are we able to hear these hard words? Words that shake us up, make us feel very uncomfortable? I think for most of us good news is something that opens a door, a step into freedom and hope and new possibilities. We hear that we have passed an exam; got a place in university; found a bursary; our daughter is engaged to be married; a child is born; we find a job. That is good news.

But the good news that John the Baptist spoke of was a harsher reality: the promise of the Holy Spirit, the promise of a baptism of fire, a promise of judgement, disturbing, questioning, challenging the status quo, calling us to “acts of sacrificial love, justice, and hope”⁴; a

² <https://www.facebook.com/archbishopofcanterbury/posts/>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v1UXh4mx4gI>

⁴ Peterson, E H 1989. *The Contemplative Pastor*. 11

radical call to change our ways. Are we ready to hear this good news, and respond?

It may well be that the defining events of 2016 will be, globally, ongoing terror attacks by ISIS and other groups aligned with them – and the response of those who are attacked; and, in our own country, more #feesmustfall protests on our campuses, especially in the first half of the year.

John the Baptist points us to Jesus in the midst of all this. He helps us to see Jesus, to see signs of God’s grace. And he calls us to be signs of Christ, people who help others to see Jesus.

We need to pay attention to God, in the months ahead – and the season of Advent helps us to do this. The crises we may well face will strip away the veneer, the comfort, the masks, and reveal “the side-by-side splendours and terrors of heaven and hell.”⁵

John helps us, urges us, calls us, challenges us, in the midst of the crises and the terror, to see and find and be the signs of good news, God’s love, God’s grace.

And so the word today is a word of hope and promise; it is a word of grace and love; but it is also a difficult and radical word of repentance, which is also a word of good news. Because when we respond to God’s love and grace, we discover that doors do open, that opportunities do emerge, that the way does become clear.

CONCLUSION

And so today, during Advent, and in the months to come, let us be people of good news; people of hope; people of prayer; people who are seeking the reality of God.

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⁵ Peterson, 1989. 41