

First Sunday in Advent

Year B

Isaiah 64.1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
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.
But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity for ever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

What's going on?

The Time of Advent is a time of waiting and preparation, so all the readings have these themes in common. In the first reading the prophet Isaiah wishes that God would come again to his people. He remembers the power and might of God who in the past intervened directly in the world and made himself known. For the prophet, it now seems that God is angry and has hidden himself away because human beings have fallen into evil. The people now seem Godless and sinful and God's powerful saving presence among his people has got lost. So the prophet prays to God to reveal himself again, because human beings and God are intimately connected 'we are all the work of your hand'.

Psalm 80 1-8,18-20*

Prayer for Israel's Restoration

To the leader: on Lilies, a Covenant. Of Asaph. A Psalm.

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock!

You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth
before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.

Stir up your might,
and come to save us!

Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

O LORD God of hosts,
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?

You have fed them with the bread of tears,
and given them tears to drink in full measure.

You make us the scorn of our neighbours;
our enemies laugh among themselves.

Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name.

Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

What's going on?

As in the first reading, the psalmist asks God to come back to his people. God seems to be absent and the people are like sheep without a shepherd. The people of Israel are suffering and in trouble and need God to guard and guide them. The psalmist trusts that God will bring salvation and asks him to come.

1 Corinthians 1.3-9

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

What's going on?

This is a passage from St Paul's letter to the people in Corinth. He reminds us that even though Jesus has come to us, we are still in a time of waiting. God has not yet finished his work and we wait for a time when Christ will come again. It is our job to prepare 'the way of the Lord' and to be ready for God's final acts of reconciliation and love. Waiting and preparation do not just mean sitting back and watching to see what will happen next. As Christians, we have to use our gifts to make our world a better place and to find out what God is doing and join in. Because we are Christians and have seen what God did for us in Jesus, we have spiritual gifts which enable us to do this.

Mark 13.24-37

The Coming of the Son of Man

**‘But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.**

Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

‘From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

The Necessity for Watchfulness

‘But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.’

What’s going on?

The two Old Testament readings asked God to be present again in the world and bring salvation to the people. The writers did not know what that would look like, but they trusted and hoped in the Lord that he would do it. As Christians, we see their hopes fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. God has sent his Son to us and he has saved us by his crucifixion and resurrection. But as St Paul reminds us, this is not the end of God’s work. Salvation is not given to us so that we can sit happily in God’s waiting room waiting to go to heaven. Jesus is speaking in this passage and he is telling his followers that we still have to watch and wait and to be very attentive to what is happening in the world around us. Time will eventually run out and the world and even the universe will come to an end. How will we know what the end of our existence or the world’s existence will be like? The answer is, we don’t know, but God, as creator of the universe, will be present at that end-time and Jesus will return in the power of God as well. So our watching and

waiting is not just about our own lives, or even coming generations, but has a cosmic dimension which we should care about.

This theme is pertinent in the times we live in when some people feel that God is hidden or has disappeared, while terrible things are happening to the world, not least the damage human beings do the planet and to each other. We should take notice of the signs of our times, seek to understand more about the likely future of our planet and make preparation for God's final acts not by sitting around waiting for the end, but actively transforming our world and showing God to people through our words and actions.