

Sermon for 29 November 2020

St Andrew's, Newgate Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, Diocese of Newcastle

Advent Sunday (RCL Year B) – Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13.24-37

May my words and my meditation of our hearts be acceptable to the Lord, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

IS THIS BEGINNING OF THE END, OR THE END OF THE BEGINNING? II

If you are someone who daily uses the computer, at the end of each day when you log off the options are: Sleep ... Shut down ... Restart. Each option has its uses and there are times when you come unstuck, you are tempted to swear at or kick the machine [as in my younger days!!] or, when you are feeling more calm, you go for the Restart and hope the machine works alright in a few minutes and you are relieved that any work done has not been lost!

As we continue into the annual disorientating season where days get much shorter till Christmas, and as we begin the new church/liturgical year with Advent Sunday, we are in a sense forced to rethink how might our faith be renewed or refreshed for the coming year while facing the onslaught of worldly challenges.

Not surprisingly, the word 'rethink' is used and engaged in different contexts. Many book titles begin with the word "Rethinking": e.g.

Rethinking Globalisation; Rethinking Modernity

Rethinking Asia's Economic Miracle

Rethinking Trafficking in Women: Politics out of Security

and, not least, *Re-thinking Christianity* by the well-known theologian Keith Ward.

It is not sufficient for scholars to be writing new books, but their titles need to suggest, with the word "Rethinking" inserted, that they are saying something radically new or in research parlance, something original.

In worldly affairs, we do well to rethink Brexit with the foreboding that accompanies 1 January 2021. "Rethink", since 2002, has been the public name for what used to be known as the National Schizophrenia Fellowship (quite a mouthful!) – a necessary re-branding and moving away from old stereotypes and stigma of severe mental illness. Now it is known as Rethink Mental Illness, especially poignant and current in these trying times as thousands are facing their loss of identity, family, livelihood, and possessions.

Rethinking naturally involves 'thinking': thinking beyond, re-defining, re-assessing. Looking at matters in a new way, though not necessarily overturning all old norms but we are encouraged not to allow our past set ways overrule our future.

As we begin the new Christian year, it is an opportunity to “re-think” what Advent means for each of us and for the Church, especially in the face of new realities of the pandemic. How will our faith be shaped by the new ‘normal’ that we are forced to enter? Are we tempted to go for the options of ‘sleep’ or ‘shut down’?

We should ask if the meaning of Advent itself has been lost because we have run ahead of time to prepare ourselves for Christmas (remember the frantic shopping before the current lockdown!):

- While Advent is about preparing for the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus, Advent is also about waiting, anticipation and looking forward
- It is a season for tracing God’s purpose through the ages, for claiming history as God’s time, and for trusting the God of the past to guide and grace the future
- Advent is essentially about hope: we are challenged to hold in creative tension God’s universal purpose and how that purpose is fulfilled in specific contexts.

So, we have the Old Testament lesson for today, a piece of solid prophetic oracle:

Isaiah 64:1-9 New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,

so that the mountains would quake at your presence—

² 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!

³ When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.

⁸ Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

⁹ Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity for ever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

It is always difficult to place the oracles of a multi-layered prophetic book like Isaiah in their contexts. Isaiah quite often refers to the “eschatological period”, that is **end times**. You may find motifs like the “latter days” and that God’s people are encouraged to continue to seek righteousness and to walk in God’s path, that is walking in the light of the Lord. They echo what Paul said to the Christians in Rome to wake up from their sleep, and “to lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light”.

Hence today’s passage from Isaiah draws out appropriately the classic Advent contrasting theme of light and darkness (compare for a moment our experience of long nights and short days) and more importantly, there is that constant biblical theme of **judgement**, continuing in a way from last Sunday’s emphases.

We have a difficulty talking about judgement today, and it is a sensitive subject in the Church as well. We have no issues with love, righteousness, touchy-feely approaches, the namby-pamby Jesus – we tend to soften the biblical message so that people won’t be offended – yet, the Holy Scriptures contain many stories and themes connected with judgement. We are very fond of talking about love, yet the Church has consistently failed throughout its history and is still failing its flock and society!

Yet, in normal times on a weekly basis we recite that part of the Creed: **“He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.”** When we realise and fully appreciate that everyone will be judged – not just the ‘evil’ dictators, but Bush, Blair, Trump, Johnson, and all – then **Judgement is a sign of hope!**

In our daily lives, we are faced with ‘judgements’ of one sort or another, from the moment we wake up and look at ourselves in the mirror; the moment for instance a newcomer enters the church. We fear judgements – perhaps owing to our upbringing – and the phrase “don’t be judgemental” is often heard in daily speech.

But there are times when judgements could be helpful, for example coming from courts and tribunals, where they are promulgated after ascertaining the facts of the case, hearing the evidence from parties, where certain complaints are upheld while others are not. Such processes are meant to ensure a fair hearing and a just outcome, and hopefully justice. It is not always about money and compensation!

We turn again to Isaiah:

Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity for ever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

And take heart from our Gospel lesson:

Mark 13:24-37 New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

The Coming of the Son of Man

²⁴ ‘But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶ Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory. ²⁷ 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

²⁸ ‘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. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he^[a] is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

The Necessity for Watchfulness

³² ‘But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Beware, keep alert;^[b] for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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, ³⁶ or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: **Keep awake.**’

Advent reminds us there is a mystery to things we can never know; yet we must always be awake and be ready! Readiness is a habit of life, concerned with our neighbour and those in need as last Sunday’s Gospel clearly reminded us.

So, not knowing, waiting without a timetable ought to keep the Church honest and open. We cannot say that later will be good enough. Now is the time that matters to God. ***So, judgement is hope, and hope must accompany compassion!***

*From chaos and darkness, health and sickness, comfort and insecurity,
plenty and poverty; and from all places,
may God gather us into a safe home.*

*Eternal God, you are the King of justice, glory, and integrity,
We belong to you!*

Amen.