

Sunday November 30<sup>th</sup>. Advent Sunday  
13:24-37

Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark

The country is in a mess. People have become greedy. They only care about possessions. Cities are crumbling. Traditional values have been forgotten. There are powerful and well-armed enemies just beyond the nation's borders. Everyone is afraid: when will the enemy strike closer to home?

No, I'm not talking about 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain, although, sadly, I probably could be. This is the state of Judah, 600 years before the birth of Christ. The Northern kingdom, Israel, has already fallen to the Assyrian empire, and Isaiah, in the book that bears his name, warns Judah, the Southern kingdom, that continuing to live the way they are doing will bring about a similar fate. Just over 100 years later this prophecy comes true: the Babylonian empire overruns Judah, and most of her people are taken away into captivity. The Temple in Jerusalem is destroyed. This is God's judgement on the people after they have repeatedly failed to hear the warnings of the prophets.

If we look at our other reading, in Mark's Gospel, we will find some striking similarities: the nation is again in peril from a foreign empire, the Romans this time. The people have failed to listen to the prophetic voice of John the Baptist, warning them to turn from their wicked ways, just as Isaiah did, all those centuries ago. The Temple, rebuilt after the Exile, will again be destroyed within a few years.

Jesus' vision of a time at the end of time, a time when the whole created order will be changed, uses the same sort of apocalyptic language as Isaiah. With the terrible image of a darkened sun, and stars falling from the sky, he is following in a long tradition of Jewish thought and expression. How do you describe the indescribable? Whatever it means - and it has been interpreted in many ways, by many different people - what it does tell us is that God's story is not yet finished; it doesn't finish with the nice story of shepherds and angels, it doesn't even end with the death and Resurrection of Jesus. The story goes on, until God's purposes for his world - his universe - have been completed. And that completion will of necessity include judgement.

Have you been asked the question yet? You know the one: so, are you all ready for Christmas? I wonder whether anyone has ever said yes to that question? (Or is that just me?) Is Advent about getting ready for Christmas? I prefer to think of it as getting ready for Christ - a much

more scary prospect even than fighting your way through the crowds in JL. Jesus tells us, in the final verses of today's Gospel - that we must keep watch, because no-one knows the day or the hour...

During the Sundays of Advent, we are going to be focusing on the readings from Isaiah, and I hope the reasons for that will become clearer over the coming weeks. If we look again at the passage we heard earlier Isaiah seems to be saying that judgement has already been made on the people in his day:

There is a fervent plea to God for help:

*O, that you would rend the heavens and come down.*

The problems are too big for mere human beings; only intervention by God can save them now. Isaiah recalls the way God has acted in the past:

*For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.*

But - and it's a big but -

*when we continued to sin against [your ways] you were angry. How then can we be saved?*

Isaiah acknowledges their unworthiness in the most abject terms:

*All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind, our sins sweep us away.*

And what is the reaction of the people? They say God has stopped listening to them, and so they stop praying! There's a bit of a chicken and egg question here, isn't there? Did the people really stop praying because God stopped listening? Or did they stop praying, so there was nothing for God to listen to? Over two and a half thousand years ago, and we see human beings behaving exactly like we do today. Perhaps we too sometimes make the mistake of thinking God isn't listening to our prayers, because we don't give ourselves the time to listen to God. Placing ourselves before God in silence can be of enormous value: it gives us a chance to do the listening!

So, the people stand under judgement from God for their wrongdoing. But then, there is a change of tone, and Isaiah prays fervently on behalf of the people for deliverance: *Yet, O Lord, you are our Father.....for we are all your people.* Despite his awareness of God's righteousness, and of the people's sinfulness, Isaiah still believes there is hope.

*We are all your people.* Because God is not just a God of judgement; he is also a God of promises. God made a Covenant with his people, long ago, a Covenant which often seems to be a rather one-sided affair: even when God's people fail to keep their side of the agreement, God remains faithful to them: a Father, Isaiah says. And he uses another image to describe the relationship between God and his people: he describes God as the potter, for whom we are clay in his hands, a reminder that the God of Israel is a creator God, and that as his creation we belong to him. Despite the bleakness of the situation and the sense of desperate need, there is after all hope.

*for we are all your people.*

And make no mistake: we too are God's people. There is continuity between then and now, and the link is Jesus himself, who is both an heir of the old Covenant, and the one who makes a new Covenant, for all people.

*for we are all your people.*

The Jewish nation at the time of Jesus is in desperate need of deliverance, from both temporal and moral threats to its well-being, just as it was six centuries before when Isaiah warned them of the consequences of their actions. Listen again to Isaiah's heartfelt plea for deliverance:

*Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you. As when the fire sets twigs ablaze and causes the water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!*

Isaiah expects, and asks for, God's presence to be felt on a cosmic scale. *Rend the heavens!* Break through from one dimension to another; enter our world in a big, bold, dramatic way. Show our enemies who's boss!

Two and a half thousand years after Isaiah, things haven't changed much: our world is still beset by violence and corruption and desperate need. Looked at another way, though, everything has changed: six centuries after Isaiah's passionate prayer God did indeed rend the heavens, entering our world of mess and muddle - but not by making the mountains tremble before him.

He didn't tear apart the fabric of the universe in order to make his presence known. On the contrary, he slipped in quietly among us, became part of this world from within. The potter became the clay.

Advent is about expectation: the expectation of judgement, yes, but also the expectation of hope. Where do we as Christians expect to find God entering our world here and now? Not dramatically through the sky, *rending the heavens*, but quietly, from within; that's the place to look for the God made known to us through Jesus Christ. And so judgement is tempered by mercy, by the one-sided Covenant of a God whose love knows no bounds. We have been given yet another chance.

If we are looking for hope and comfort as we prepare for Christmas this year let us remember that this is a God who responds to his people's cry, yes, but that he is also a God who doesn't do the expected. That is our Advent hope.