

Reflection for Sunday 6th December: Advent 2: PEACE (Isaiah 9:1-7)

Over the last week or so there has been a series of stunning sunrises. I wish I could say that I've personally witnessed most of them – I'm reliant on this information from Alise who has been dropping Amelie to the school bus every day, and stopping the car by the side of the road for a few moments to watch the glorious colours of a winter dawn sky.

There's something wonderful about sunrise, isn't there, especially after a long dark night. The light dawns and hope stirs again. Whatever happened yesterday, today is a new day, full of possibility. No wonder the prophet Jeremiah talked about God's mercies being 'new every morning'.

And in today's famous passage we get this great opening declaration: 'the people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned' (v1). A light has dawned. There is hope, as we saw last week.

God chose an interesting place to be the source of this new hope, though: Galilee of the Gentiles. An unfashionable part of the country, not the obvious choice for a great move of God – let's be honest, those of us who live in Milton Keynes know this feels like (and we like it that way). Galilee? Can anything good happen there?

But there is a greater wisdom at work in choosing Galilee than we might realise. I'll quote David Pawson here: 'The promised land was a very narrow strip between the Mediterranean on one hand and the Arabian Desert on the other. It was a corridor through which *all the traffic from Europe, Asia and Africa had to pass*. It usually passed down the coast along a road called The Way of the Sea. The crossroads of the ancient world was at the hill of Megiddo (Armageddon in Hebrew). All the world's traffic passed through it, and there was a little village called Nazareth on a hill overlooking the crossroads. For this reason Galilee, the Northern part of Israel, was called Galilee of the Nations, because international traffic went through it.' In other words, it was the gateway to Africa, Asia and Europe – much of the known world.

So where else would a global messiah be born, if not at the crossroads of the world? 'To us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. He will reign on David's throne forever, and 'of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.'

It's not such a strange idea after all, is it?

And what we love about this great passage are all the marvellous names given to this Saviour, this new king for the world – ultimately these names are all names of God, so the divine ancestry of this new king is beyond doubt. The Messiah would have the wisdom of a wonderful counsellor, the power of mighty God, the intimacy of an everlasting father, and would usher in a new era of peace. He would be the Prince of Peace.

This era of peace is emphasised by the material in verses 3-5. War would end and even clothing stained with the blood of battle would be destroyed.

In this second week of Advent, we celebrate the theme of Peace, especially the peace promised by the prophets of the Old Testament. Of all the themes of advent, this is perhaps the one where we need to emphasise the nature of this promise as now *and* not yet. The world is not yet the place of peace we long for. There remains conflict – the final reign of peace will only come with Christ's second Advent, his second coming.

And yet we also recognise that **where Christ dwells there can be peace, even in the storm**. The peace which rules in our hearts; the peace that brings reconciliation between people; the peace that allows us to draw close to God again.

What we see in part now is what we long for in its fullness, and every Advent we have the chance to renew our commitment to the divine vision of true peace, to the renewal of all things which the Prince of Peace came to bring.

And when the Saviour comes, this promise of peace is declared once more. The old priest Zechariah quotes this very verse in his song at the end of Luke 1: 'to shine on those living in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.' Then the angels declare it again in the skies over Bethlehem: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.'

Today, let's invite the peace of Christ into our hearts again – for where Christ dwells we have the possibility of the peace that transcends understanding. And let's renew our determination to be those who pray for and work for peace in this world.

A light has dawned – and may that light bring us God's peace again this season. Amen.