

Year A Advent 1

Isaiah 2: 1-5

Psalm 122

Romans 13: 11-14

Matthew 24: 36-44

Advent is a time of longing and anticipation, as we travel on the prophetic pathways that lead to the arrival of the child who is God's answer to these very same longings. All the more important then, that time is taken to journey through Advent and to voice these longings in the reality of our world and in our community of faith.

This morning we lit the first of the four advent candles. The first advent candle symbolises hope, and if you can recall the prayer we said when the candle was lit, you can see that it is about hope.

We said, in that prayer:

May the seeds they planted in the world – peace, joy, love – take hold in our hearts and stretch towards the light. We light a candle for hope. May it light the way.

This advent prayer refers to those of faith who came before us, the saints, and of the seeds they planted. Not literal seeds of course, but prayers and actions that would allow aspects of God's kingdom to break through – peace, joy and love. All of the saints' actions relied on faith and an active expression of hope. They all chose to walk in the Lord's path, doing whatever they could to show glimpses of God's kingdom to others and work for those glimpses to become part of everyone's daily lives.

Sowing a seed always feels like an act of hope. A small seemingly insignificant dried-up bit of a plant is put into some soil. We have all done this at some time or another, even if we aren't all avid

gardeners. To help the seed grow we look after it – providing water and cover from cold weather, strong winds and other animals that might find it a tasty meal. And most of the time, what seems miraculous happens; a green shoot appears and with further care and attention, it grows into a flourishing, strong plant. It naturally seeks the light and will bend towards it given half a chance. But what happens if we sow a seed and don't care for it? Without the right conditions many fail to appear, and even some that do break through the soil, they have to compete with weeds, attacks from slugs or mice and unseasonable weather. If we don't take some action, the hope in the seed becoming a healthy plant may be dashed.

And so it is with our faith. Isaiah uses such familiar words to describe a journey, a pathway to the Lord, to become familiar with his teachings, so that we may also walk in the light of the Lord.

Isaiah's words paint a compelling picture for us. He gives us a wonderful vision of a different world that can be: a world in which all the nations are drawn to God's holy mountain, so that they may learn the ways of peace. In his vision Isaiah envisages God as teacher, peacemaker, and arbitrator. The nations are all drawn to God where they receive instruction about the ways of peace, including the resolution of their disputes, and in lasting justice.

It is only when those conditions have been met will the nations turn over their weapons and turn them into constructive tools to enable everyone to grow food and enjoy God's bountiful generosity from the earth.

There is no doubt that Isaiah the prophet had sufficient faith that this day will come.

But, today, we know that we are still far off from this position. We have just passed the nine-month anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine, with no prospect of peace in the short or maybe even the

medium term. There are over 40 ongoing military conflicts in the world today¹.

And we don't need to look overseas to see that real peace is elusive. Whilst in our own country some people are treated without dignity and worth, not seen as equal as God sees them, when people struggle financially and their health deteriorates due to the stresses and anxieties of daily living, there can be no peace. The sort of peace Isaiah was describing is the deepest sort of peace; shalom, salem. A peace that enables people to be free from anxieties, to be able to express themselves and flourish.

To achieve peace in our country and in the world, we have to start with ourselves. Martin Luther King Jr said, "Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek but a means by which we arrive at that goal." MLK is telling us that we have to be people of peace, of shalom, and live out a life of peace in order to effect peace elsewhere.

Isaiah invites us to walk in the light of the Lord during this season of Advent. To join in a pilgrimage to God's holy mountain to learn maybe for the first time, or maybe to learn once more, to walk in the way of peace, to open our hearts and minds to God, open to learning afresh the ways of justice, the values of God and God's concern for the poor. Isaiah knows that God is the agent of transformation, whilst acknowledging that God waits for us to come before God and open our hearts to learning and changing. Isaiah talks about the goals of unity, justice and peace. These are all things we hope for, as Christians. His hope was for all people to live together in the most profound peace of shalom – a well-being that goes deep into every person, a shalom that means there is unity, there is justice, there is peace, by and for all people.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ongoing_armed_conflicts

I chose to add in the psalm allotted for today – Psalm 122 – because it also speaks of going to the holy temple of God in Jerusalem, the city of peace. This is a play on words – salem is thought to be from the same root word salam and shalom – indicating that Jeru -salem is the city of peace.

Psalm 122 is a psalm of ascent – a psalm recited by Jews as they travelled towards Jerusalem. Up to Jerusalem. Most people from the northern kingdom would not have crossed Samaria, they would have headed east and walked along the Jordan valley to Jericho then walked up to Jerusalem. Jericho is about 840 ft below sea level whilst Jerusalem in about 2,500 ft above sea level. They are about 15 miles apart.

The psalm's last two verses are:

8 For the sake of my relatives and friends

I will say, “Peace be within you.”

9 For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,

I will seek your good.

When I read this psalm earlier in the week, it really struck me as profound that the psalmist says, ‘Peace be within you’. Not peace be **with** you, but **within** you.

The final verse underlines this by stating, ‘I will seek your good’.

Today’s theme is ‘hope’. As I have said many times before, I believe that as Christians our hope is something tangible and calls us to action. This is a personal challenge. A challenge for each one of us to recognise our part, that change will not come about until we turn to God so that we may learn the way of peace; peace that is a matter of practice, and what challenges that may bring for us. How might we learn the practice of peace?

Who in our communities or in our history do we recognise as peacemakers, whose example we could follow? Do we need to make

peace with ourselves first, in order to make peace with others with whom it is time to make peace? God's kingdom is experienced when our energies and focus are on peace-making and the building up of others.

Isaiah is clear that God's presence will draw people, people who are then transformed, where peace and justice will reign, weapons of violence will be turned in to tools for growing food for nourishment. Isaiah talks about the goals of unity, justice and peace. These are all things we hope for. His hope was for all people to live together in the most profound peace of shalom. Do we dare to hope for what Isaiah hoped for, and prophesied would take place when the Messiah came, and heaven and earth are transformed?

True hope is not an empty feeling. In our Christian love for all others made in the image of God, we should be unsettled, to put it mildly, by the state of our world, and how far it seems from the world Isaiah describes.

True hope should draw us in to deeper involvement in our world, in to a life of love, justice, unity and peace, being in solidarity with the whole suffering creation.

I wish you an advent season full of hope, sowing seeds of love, joy and peace.