

It is the Season of Advent – What are You Waiting For?

Sermon – 14th December, 2008

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; ²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. ⁴They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

⁸For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. ⁹Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

¹⁰I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. ¹¹For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

1Thessalonians 5: 16-24

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²²abstain from every form of evil.

²³May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

Isaiah 7:14

“Therefore the Lord Himself shall give you a sign; behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel.”

In this morning's readings we find both the Prophet Isaiah and the Apostle Paul encouraging the community of the faithful to give *thanks* and praise as well as, importantly, to live Godly lives in the promise of better times to come. The implied audience in Isaiah Chapters 60-62 is the returned exiles in Jerusalem who have become despondent at the sad picture of Jerusalem. The prophet is presenting a picture of hope and encouragement in order that they will rebuild Jerusalem (v.4) in response to the glad tidings which the prophet is proclaiming. The emphasis here is on righteousness, where God makes it abundantly clear that a high priority is given to justice. In our Christian communities we would do well to similarly unite both mission and justice as elements of a coherent response to God's commandments, and to the all-inclusive love and compassion that were revealed to us through the birth of his Son, Jesus Christ.

During Advent we have the opportunity to pause and give thanks for what God has promised to us except that, while we are not required to rebuild the city of Jerusalem we *are* required to build the Kingdom of God. If God loves justice and hates robbery and wrong, we are challenged to think what that means for our time and our mission today.

In the incarnation and birth of Jesus, one can ask *did God deliver what the community was expecting*, or was there a New Covenant and a *new* mission gifted to us? What was the world waiting for at the time of the birth of God's only begotten Son? In Jewish Messianic tradition, the coming of the Messiah was largely synonymous with new leadership and a revival of the fortunes of the Jewish people. The Messiah would be of the House of David and he would be a military leader who would conquer the foes of the Israelites by force of arms. By so doing he would re-establish the temple of Jerusalem as the undisputed residence of God, and the Jews as his chosen people. This notion of salvation through power and might wasn't restricted to the Jewish community. About the time of the birth of Christ, there had already been declared a 'Saviour of the World'; the term that was used to describe *Caesar Augustus* who, by force of arms had achieved a modicum of peace and tranquility at the zenith of Roman power. What was radically different in the birth of Christ vis-à-vis the Jewish Messianic tradition, was the means by which deliverance would be granted by God; the New Covenant and the New Kingdom would be founded not upon the sword and scepter, but upon the superior power of God's love - beginning with the birth of Jesus Christ.

I wonder; have you ever marveled at God's plan in the Christmas story for the sheer power of its simplicity and humility? A few examples of what I mean here:

- The impending birth of the Son of God, directly revealed not to rulers and dignitaries, but to a lowly group of shepherds
- The child, born not into luxury and splendor – as was much admired among Hellenized Jews of that time – but in an animal shelter, complete no doubt with a little cow poo in the corner and not just a few fleas in the straw
- The journey of the Magi who, as Kings and representatives of the sword and scepter of the time, were brought to kneel before the majesty of love

If the meaning of God's plan was to be understood in terms of Jewish tradition, how difficult would it have been for an all-powerful God to deliver a very different Christmas scenario? Why not take the celestial announcement of the Messiah's birth directly to the centre of power – to

Rome – rather than some non-descript shepherd’s field? Why not assemble a loud and powerful heavenly host directly in the Courts of Ceasar where all could see and tremble? And why not resolve the ‘Who’s in Charge’ question once and for all by taking Ceasar by the scruff of the neck, then levitate and paste him onto a wall 20 or 30 feet above the highest officials of the land, for all to see and marvel?

But of course, that was not God’s plan, it was not the Christmas story, and it is not the Christmas message. So what then *is* the message, and what is it that you and I wait for during this season of Advent? I think the answer begins in the Christmas story, but it doesn’t stop there; the answer continues to unfold in the power of God’s all-inclusive love. It unfolds in the power of Christ’s own ministry which, time and again, triumphed over unjust social norms and practices, beginning with His own birth as a radical departure from Jewish expectations 2000-odd years ago. This is a recurring theme not just in the Christmas story, but continues throughout the ministry, passion and resurrection of our Lord Jesus. Just a few examples to ponder:

- The Baptism of Christ and imparting of the Holy Spirit, conducted not by High Priests of the Temple, but by John the Baptist – an impoverished mystic, recluse and prophet of God
- The recruitment of many of Christ’s Apostles from among simple fishermen and one, St. Paul, from the hated ranks of the civic tax collectors
- Teaching us that, in the eyes of *children* will be found the Kingdom of God
- The Mission to the Gentiles, where *all* of faith were welcome as Children of God without qualification or equivocation of any kind
- The passion, where we took our nature upon him, and through submission, humility and unceasing love, he redeemed us as a people
- The resurrection – where the first to see and to know the risen Christ was not one of the 12 disciples but rather a woman – a former prostitute and therefore sexual outcast - with whom those first fateful words were exchanged; “Mary Raboni”

So, what is it that *you* are preparing-for during Advent, and what will you find in the retelling of the Christmas story? May I suggest that together we collectively prepare ourselves to experience and deliver something unexpected? I suggest that we be a little unconventional in pondering the message of Christ’s birth, and about how we intend to extend this most wondrous event into our daily lives. And it seems to me that many here at St. Barnabas’ are already on the right track; you will find it in the shared Peace, you will see it in the Hamper boxes that you have filled on behalf of the needy, you can witness the reality of Christ among us in the Living Nativity this evening, and you may experience the warmth of God’s love through services and events in the days to come. I pray that you will find *your* Christmas message as God intended it to be; a wonderful, simple and powerful, if unconventional first step toward the establishment of Christ’s Kingdom here among us.

Amen.