

Sermon for Sunday 3 December 2023 – The First Sunday of Advent

Revd Graham Naylor, Curate

Isaiah 64.1-9; Psalm 80.1-8; 1 Corinthians 1.3-9; Mark 13.24-37

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our first reading from Isaiah is pretty much the second half of a lament, a corporate lament that runs from just a little bit into chapter 63 through 64. The prophet Isaiah at this time is speaking into the post-exile period. So, the people of Israel have been exiled in Babylon, a remnant remained in Jerusalem, and some have returned and all is not well.

When I was touring in the 90s in Germany, it was relatively soon after the Berlin Wall came down, and initially there was euphoria about East Germany and West Germany being reunited. It didn't last long before resentment has set in because politically there were some things done which with hindsight, probably shouldn't have been done. The East German Mark, which was worthless, was converted one to one for the Deutsche Mark. So people in East Germany who had thousands and millions of worthless East German Marks, which suddenly became Deutsche Mark millionaires and could suddenly buy Mercedes cars and the like. So West Germany resented that.

But very quickly, full employment in East Germany that had been under the communist regime ceased, because it was market forces operating and unemployment came in. So the former East Germans resented that. Imagine that scenario. You have people who have been in Jerusalem, they have stayed and tried to keep Jerusalem going during the exile, and then you have people who went away during the exile who have come back. Can you imagine the sort of tension that might be going on between those who remained and those who left and came back? And in this, Isaiah laments.

Lament is a wonderful sort of subject to explore. I think the Church needs to recover lament. Lament is about saying, we have this problem and we take it to the very God who can do something about it. It's one of the beauties of lament. You're not just lamenting into an open space, you go to the God who can do something about the problem, and you pour out your heart. And the prophets sit between the people and God, and between God and the people.

Say, the difference between Yahweh and the other gods of the ancient Near East is it was only Yahweh, the God of Israel, who could do anything, unlike the gods of other nations who couldn't. We read through Isaiah, and one of the things we notice is this specific thing, that it is the willingness of God to act on behalf of his faithful followers that Isaiah calls on. He reminds God of the old days, what you have done; looking back, but then looking forward. A little bit beyond the reading that we had, the lament finishes with this: 'After all this (this is Isaiah speaking to God), after all this, will you restrain yourself, O God? Will you keep silent and punish us severely?...!' Question mark, dot, dot, dot. Isaiah is saying God will you intervene, will you do something?

We know that the God of Israel did that by coming in the incarnation, what we will celebrate at Christmas, God intervening through his Son, taking on human form, lived a life. And in Mark's gospel, Mark doesn't. Mark is a short gospel, because he doesn't include a lot of Jesus' teaching. He demonstrates in his gospel, or the Gospel according to St Mark, the good news of Jesus Christ. He demonstrates who Jesus is by what Jesus does more than what he says.

And then we get to this pivot point which we read today, part of Mark 13, it's actually the second half. The whole of Mark 13 is known as the Olivet discourse because it happened on the Mount of Olives. And if you've been in church the last few weeks, you will know that in Matthew's Gospel, this same passage or the parallel passages, Jesus has come out of the temple, and the disciples are asking - they're talking about the splendour of the temple - and Jesus says, but it will be destroyed, and they ask another question, what are the signs of the end of the age? Two questions in one with two answers. Mark's Gospel in chapter 13, a little bit tricky because it moves backwards and forwards between talking about the destruction of the temple and the end times, to read it very carefully. But we're at this pivot point.

We're looking today at the part where Jesus is talking about his return, the P Parousia, a lovely word to roll around the tongue, Parousia (pair-oo-see-ah). It is the return of our Lord Jesus Christ at the end times, the time when the end of the age will come and there will be judgement. Notice, I'm calling it his return, not his second coming. Scripture never links the return of Jesus at the end time with his incarnation. His coming again is not linked to his birth, it is linked to his Ascension - the beginning of Acts, the angels talking to the disciples saying 'as you have seen him go, you will see Him return'. Are you with me? Yeah, we did it on Pentecost Sunday. So the return of Jesus is about his return having ascended.

And in the whole of Mark 13, four times, Jesus warns his disciple to stay alert, to stay awake, to stay alert to the signs of what will happen with the destruction of the temple; and we think that Mark was writing just before the destruction of the temple, around the time of the persecution of the Christians around 65/68 AD, before the collapse of the temple or the fall of the temple in 70 AD. Right, the church in Rome? It's an encouragement to endure through persecution, but also to look forward with hope. Just as an aside, that's why there's sometimes confusion over this generation will not pass away. And people get into all sorts of tricks to say, oh, it's just the nations of the world that won't pass away before Jesus return at the end times. No, he's talking within 40 years, if we say that he was alive until about 30 AD, the next generation won't pass away until the destruction of the temple.

So we don't need to get into any jumping through hoops. But he says, 'Keep awake, keep alert'. Now, I don't know about you, but my answer to how do you stay awake and alert is plenty of caffeine. The question is, how do we stay awake and alert in this time between Jesus' Ascension and his return at the end time, which is what we reflect on during Advent, as well as preparing for Christmas and celebrating the Incarnation, we are looking forward to his return at the end times. How do we, as the people of God, stay awake and alert?

Maybe one of the things we do is we keep the temperature down in church so that we're sort of shivering rather than it being warm, because we know if we keep churches warm, people fall out of windows and die. You with me? No? Brothers and sisters, we need to read our Bibles more. When Paul was saying goodbye to the Ephesian Church, he was in a room talking to them all. And you can read this in Acts... And it says that it was warm; the warmth of the oil lamps, you know what it's like, sleepy and bit like a log fire, and you just get all sleepy. And a young man was sitting on the windowsill, it was sort of crowded house-church set up, and in the warmth and Paul speaking and speaking and speaking, and you may say it's like the Curate this morning, just speaking and speaking, that's fine, I don't care! And Eutychus fell asleep, fell out of the window and was found dead, one storey down. Paul goes outside, brings him back to life, and then these wonderful words in Scripture - 'and then Paul continued preaching until dawn'. You would think he'd got the message; shut up, Paul, people are dying. But no. And then he goes and he says goodbye to the leaders of Ephesians. They go and see him off on the boat for his next mission or wherever. He's on a boat (you can tell this is a side that I've not researched. Can't remember quite the facts), but he goes and another funny bit about Scripture, the Ephesian leaders rejoiced greatly and I wonder whether that was because Paul had shut up and left, but now they're rejoicing because they'd just been encouraged by Paul.

But how do we stay awake? Sorry, that was a real aside, wasn't it? I think Paul's words to the Corinthians can help us here. And I'm not going to unpack this very much other than to read it a bit, because Paul is talking to the Corinthian Church, who, like us, are between the Ascension and the return of Jesus at the end times and the Judgement. And he's encouraging, and he's encouraging a really messy bunch of people, but he says to them, you have been enriched in him. That's in Jesus. You have been enriched in him in speech and knowledge of every kind, just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you, so that you are not lacking any spiritual gift.

I don't often do this, but turn to the person next to you and just say 'You are not lacking in any spiritual gift'. You are not lacking in any spiritual gift Chris. Not lacking in any spiritual gift. Actually, if I'm going to talk in Yoda speak, not lacking in not one spiritual gift - not even one spiritual gift as the body of Christ. Maybe not individually, we all have different gifts, but as the body of Christ, as the Americans would say 'y'all', wouldn't they Jerry? You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, as you wait for his return and his revealing.

And here's Paul's promise and God's promise to the church in Corinth. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul is saying you can be blameless on the day that Jesus returns and we all face judgement. Now, if that doesn't blow your mind, I don't know what will. Because I know what I'm like, and I'm sure you know what you're like. The idea that one day I will stand blameless, somehow, through the work of sanctification. I will stand blameless before Almighty God at the time of judgement because of what Jesus did on the cross and the work of the Holy Spirit.

And the reason that Paul can say this is because of what he says next. God is faithful; by him, by God, by a faithful God, you have been called into fellowship of his son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

I'm going to close by reading that section of Scripture again, but in a slightly different way. And I hope in doing it I don't offend anybody, that I'm changing Scripture. And I'm going to read from the beginning of Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

'Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God and our brother Sosthenes, to the Church of God that is in Lavenham, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

'I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given to you in Christ Jesus. For in every way you have been enriched in Him in speech and knowledge of every kind, just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you, so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful. By him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.'

May it be so. Amen.