

Advent Sunday 2016

St Mary's, Barnes

Isaiah 2, 1-5; Matthew 24, 36-44

For many people these are extremely dispiriting times, indeed downright depressing. The Brexit vote, the American Election, the continuing bombing in Aleppo, the massive human rights abuses in so many parts of the world, the threatening presence of Putin's Russia, to mention just a few issues, are enough to make anyone lose heart.

The world from which our first reading this morning came was also dangerous and desolating. It was the last quarter of the 8th century before Christ when the kingdom of Judah was not only threatened by the Northern Kingdom but by the great superpower of Assyria. It was at that time however that one of the great religious and moral movements in history emerged—a movement associated with the names of Isaiah, Amos, Hosea and Micah, and collectively as the 8th century prophets. It is Isaiah who sets the theme for Advent, for the first reading today and for every Sunday in Advent comes from Isaiah chapters 1-40. His message in those difficult and depressing times had two parts. First, people had to see that what was happening was a Divine judgement on the failures of their society. People had turned their back on God, their religion was hollow and they were acting cruelly to one another. In the very first chapter of Isaiah we read

Though you offer countless prayers, I shall not listen; there is blood on your hands...cease to do evil, learn to do good. Pursue justice, guide the oppressed; uphold the rights of the fatherless, and plead the widow's cause.

Then a few verses on

Your rulers are rebels, associates of thieves; everyone of them loves a bribe and chases after gifts; they deny the fatherless their rights, and the widow's cause is never heard.

In those days people tended to think of disasters as directly inflicted on them by God as punishment, a view we cannot share today. But the concept of judgement remains real for the simple fact that every action has consequences, every political policy its implications, short or long term. As human beings we reap what we sow, even though it may have been sowed in previous decades or by others. Both Brexit and the American election result have been widely interpreted as a judgement on the failure not only of recent economic and political policies but on the whole political establishment, and if them, all of us who vote them in.

Deeper than the failure of particular political and economic policies however we also have to ask about the moral foundations of the society we now inhabit, whether there is not something fundamentally flawed in our present culture. The front page of one newspaper not long ago was taken up with two stories. One was that Oxford Dictionaries had voted as its international word of the year “Post truth” a word whose use had increased 2000 % in 2016 compared with last year. It seems we live in a post truth society. But an absolute requirement for any society is the assumption that most people most of the time mean what they say. Without that there could be no trust and therefore no relationships. Of course people select facts to suit their case and put their own spin on things, are economic with the *actualité* as was once famously said. But have we now really given up the idea that truthfulness as such matters? The other story concerned a man who ran a very aggressive tax avoidance business costing tax payers hundreds of millions of pounds. When confronted with this he simply said “Everyone’s moral compass is different, isn’t it?” Well no. The outer casing may be different but what makes a compass a compass is that the pointer is always drawn towards magnetic North. There is a magnetic north, there is such a thing as truth and there is that in us which is drawn towards it, however glazed over the glass on our personal compass might be.

So, the first theme of the 8th prophets and Isaiah, in particular, is a reading of the contemporary situation in terms of Divine judgement

leading them to issue a moral indictment of the society which had brought the disaster upon themselves. The second theme is the one expressed in today's first reading. It is the vision of a very different kind of society which God is bringing about. The passage imagines that society as a high mountain to which all the nations come to be guided by Divine wisdom and this will lead to a condition of universal peace with weapons of war being turned into farming implements. So in the light of this vision the prophet proclaims "Come people of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord."

Or as the prophet Micah put it

The Lord has told you O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6, 8)

At the time of Jesus there was a strong sense of expectation in some quarters that this new society was about to come into being, an expectation that Jesus himself seemed to have shared. The first Christians believed that this new age had indeed been inaugurated in him, but its culmination effecting the whole world still lay in the future. That sense of expectation faded over the years but European history is studded with periods in which it was renewed with a great sense of excitement. People expected it in the year 1000 for example and even some in 2000. But in today's Gospel reading Jesus gives us definitive guidance about this. There he says "About that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, not even the Son, but the father alone." Then he goes on to say that whenever it comes, it will come suddenly, therefore we are to keep awake and hold ourselves ready. Keeping ourselves awake holding ourselves ready, the great theme of Advent.

We hear a lot about mindfulness these days-and that goes half-way to Christian practise. We are indeed to be mindful, that is, fully awake and alert to every moment, but mindful in the light of the Lord, awake in him. And what this means in our present distressing time with all its challenges is standing firm on our deepest convictions and not to

let them be eroded by the climate of the times or a sense of hopelessness. This means

Standing firm on the conviction of our common humanity, a humanity which Christ came to share, with every other human being, across every divide.

Standing firm on the conviction that the face of Christ is to be discerned in people of all religion and none.

Standing firm on the conviction that in a globalised world, whether in or out of the EU we need to work in the closed possible partnership with all other nations.

On our conviction that in a world of radical injustice we are still called to work for the common good, the good of all.

That in a culture hostile or indifferent to religion we are called to follow Christ in the tradition of the great 8th century prophets.

So we are called to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God.