

Sermon Advent 2 (Bible Sunday) 2020

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| 6 th December Advent 2 Gift Services | 9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton 11.00 Holy Communion Halling | Isaiah 40 vv 1-11 p723 II Peter 3 vv 8-15 p1224 Mark 1 vv 1-8 p1002 |
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BLESSED Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

ALMIGHTY God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Thy word is a lantern unto my feet: and a light unto mine eyes.

What is God saying to us today? The Old Testament lesson begins, *Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.* Could this be what God is saying to us today? We have suffered enough. Hang on in there a few more weeks and there will be at least three, safe effective vaccines, the COVID crisis will be over, and we shall go back to living the way we lived before most of us even knew what a corona virus was. Is this the message God is entrusting me with for this week's sermon? Give the people hope. Hope is a very precious thing which sustains us through the darkest times. Hope, along with faith and charity (or love), is one of the three great Christian virtues. Christians have every reason to be full of hope. *Our help standeth in the Name of the Lord : who hath made heaven and earth.* (Psalm 124⁷). The preacher's task is to give people hope.

But I am also aware of the very real danger of giving false hope. Time after time, in the Bible we read about false prophets who told people that they had no need to repent. Bad things would never happen to them. Either God was on their side and would look after them, whatever they themselves did (however foolish or wicked they might be) or else God wouldn't be bothered (or couldn't be bothered) to involve Himself in our human affairs and that therefore our faith or lack of it would really make no difference to anything. So we might as well go on as we are without any anxiety about the possible consequences.

More often than not in the Bible, the true prophet is the one who warns people that, if they do not mend their wicked ways, there will be a terrible judgment. It is the false prophets who promise that, no matter how corrupt they or their society may be, God will always ensure that they live in peace and safety. They can worship false gods; oppress the poor, the widow and the orphan; abuse the stranger; cheat their customers pass their time in drunkenness and vice - their streets running with blood - and nothing bad will ever happen to them. Either God doesn't care or He is so nice that He won't hold them to account. It is obvious why the false prophets were generally much more popular in their time than the true prophets. But it is the true prophets whose names are remembered – Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos, John the Baptist, Jesus – even though they were rejected in their own day by their own people, often persecuted, occasionally killed. The word of the true prophets resounds down through the generations because it is true – the eternal Word of God.

So, I didn't want to risk being a false prophet, offering false hope. Can I honestly say, *We have suffered enough. Hang on in there a few more weeks and there will be at least three, safe effective vaccines, the COVID crisis will be over, and we shall go back to living the way we lived before most of us even knew what a corona virus was* and be confident that I am speaking in the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Ghost? I have two reservations.

The first is scientific, rather than religious or theological. Quite honestly, I don't know enough about viruses and vaccines and epidemiology to pontificate about them. It isn't for me to say how effective the vaccines might turn out to be and whether they will make it possible for us to return to our normal pre-COVID lives. It is likely that nobody can say for certain at this stage, but a lot of people know a lot more than I do about

these subjects and it would be wrong for me to share my limited understanding of cell biology, immunology and the dynamics of pandemics from the pulpit and pass it off as the Word of God. We pray for those scientists, doctors and nurses, behavioural scientists, officials and politicians whose vocation it is to work on these problems on our behalf. We don't presume to know any better than they do about the subjects in which they are expert simply because we are Christians. God has gifted them with their skills and talents, even if some of them don't know Whom to thank for their abilities, just as He has given you and me our particular gifts which we are called to use in His service.

My second difficulty is religious or theological. It is in my field as a Christian preacher, the vocation to which God has called me and for which He has endowed me with certain gifts of the Holy Spirit. *We shall go back to living the way we lived before most of us even knew what a corona virus was.* Is that what God wants us to do? We can't claim that we were perfect people before COVID struck. England wasn't a perfect country. There was a great deal wrong in the world long before we experienced the current pandemic. Does God want us to go back to being the way we were before COVID? Or is He calling us afresh to repentance? Isaiah's words in today's OT lesson *Prepare ye the way of the Lord* are understood to refer to John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus. And how did John prepare people for the coming of Jesus? He told them to repent of their sins. John's message was indeed about the coming of the Kingdom of God, God's Kingdom of justice, mercy and peace, in which *there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain* (as it says in Revelation 21). But, in order to enter the Kingdom of God, it is necessary to repent of our sins. Of those outside the Kingdom, those who harden their hearts against God and refuse to accept His love, it goes on (in Revelation 21⁸) *But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.* That God *desireth not the death of a sinner* is something I read twice a day every day, but it would be foolishly complacent to assume that the death of a sinner is something which cannot happen. God respects our freedom to choose to reject Him, while warning us of the consequences if we do.

In our Epistle reading, S Peter looks forward to God making all things new, *new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.* We are to live as citizens of the Kingdom of God, here and now, to dwell in righteousness here on earth today and tomorrow and for the rest of our lives. So we are called to examine ourselves, and where our lives fall short of the example set by Jesus, to repent of our sins, to be ready to meet Him at all times.

Given my two reservations, then, how can I fulfil my calling to preach the Gospel of hope in our current situation? *Our help standeth in the Name of the Lord : who hath made heaven and earth.* I don't know enough about the science of COVID to predict how well the vaccines will work or when we shall be able to give up on social distancing. But I do know that God is in charge and that I can trust Him for my life and that I can trust Him for the world and its future. God is faithful. God is love. We have access to God and His peace through faith. Knowing God, our hope is in Him and our hope will never make us ashamed because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts.

Looking at the broader picture of human sin and its consequences for the world, both for the sinner and for the sinned against, Jesus is our hope. He has overcome the power of sin, the world and the devil through His love in dying for us on the Cross. Our hope for our salvation is in Him and, not for this world alone, but for that which is to come. Our hope in Christ therefore transcends all our fears and indeed all our earthly ambitions. I Corinthians 13¹² *For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.* ¹³ *And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.*

If we'd had a psalm today it would have been Psalm 85. I close with a couple of verses from it. 8. *I will hearken what the Lord God will say concerning me : for he shall speak peace unto his people, and to his saints, that they turn not again.* 9. *For his salvation is nigh them that fear him : that glory may dwell in our land.*