

## **Sermon on Third Sunday of Advent 2017 by Rev'd Canon David Hodgson at All Saints Church Wokingham**

We begin our services in Advent with a picture of waking up as the light appears, from the words of St Paul's Letter to the Romans

“It is time for us to wake out of sleep, for deliverance is nearer to us now than it was when first we believed. It is far on in the night; day is near.”

Many of the Bible readings we hear in church throughout the season of Advent are messages of hope and encouragement to be awake to the light even in the middle of darkness – messages about looking for the light and living in the light of Christ even when there is darkness around. Why are we able to have this hope? What is the basis of this message? It is because God has sent the light already into the world in Jesus Christ – it is because of Jesus that we know God's reign and kingdom of peace and joy will come – there is nothing that will prevent it coming in the end and, what's more, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, we have been given the power to hasten its arrival.

In Psalm 126 we heard the prayer of a people longing for better times; remembering that God had been their help in former times of difficulty, and praying that God would restore their fortunes again. And the psalm ends with words of promise that God will return to help them, that though they sow seeds in sorrow at times, perhaps in times of poor conditions, hoping but never certain of the future, they will reap a full harvest.

Even in the middle of the time of sorrow, in this psalm, as in many other parts of Scripture, the promises of God are remembered and expressed, and those words inspire hope in those who sing them.

This Sunday - The third Sunday of Advent - we remember John the Baptist – who bore witness to the light – the true Light coming into the world.

John's Gospel from which we read treats the story of John the Baptist in a distinctive way compared to the other three gospels. John's Gospel puts the emphasis on John the Baptist as a voice only - not the expected prophet, not Elijah come again, certainly not the longed-for Messiah - but a voice. This voice which cries out from the place of desolation – the wilderness – as Isaiah did – and as Isaiah had said – a voice not of his own making but a voice speaking with the power of Holy Scripture – a voice which points to the light – the Christ who had come. The Baptist's work and message was pure and simple - to bear witness to Jesus - to give evidence by his testimony to the truth about who Jesus is - so that all should believe in Jesus. The Baptist's message was to show Jesus for the Light he is so we may believe in Jesus as God's chosen One, the Light of the world.

Do we need a message of hope today? We do. Do some of us deny we need that message? Sadly, we do. Advent is both a penitential season – a season of challenge to change; and a season of joyful hope-filled expectancy. One of Advent's challenges is to be reminded that God's light is not the same as the false dawn of our own light– not the same as the security of our own bubble of comfortableness – which sometimes we allow to insulate ourselves from seeing what God is calling us to see – but God's Light is the light of Christ - the light of truth and compassion. This is not always the light we live by - but is the only true light which brings healing and gives us hope.

The Advent message then first calls us to open our eyes to the truth of who we are and where we are as individuals and families and as a society. Some of us might be in a false bubble of light without realising that it is still dark outside. But others know only too well how much we need that

message of hope, and how much our society needs that message – that voice - which bears witness to Christ - and more – those actions which make the truth of Christ's light and love a lived and experienced reality.

It's not to depress us that I want to remind us of the difficulties and desperate needs faced by many in our own community let alone the wider country- but to help us not to be in denial – for if we are to have hope then we need to be awake - awake to the truth about the areas of our life together which need the message of hope and the light of life which shines in Christ.

Jesus announced good news for the poor. And so therefore Advent challenges us to consider and to act – how is what I do and say in my life; how is what our families and this church, how is that good news for the poor?

If I asked you what do you think are the vital necessary ingredients of Christian preaching and ministry – what would you say? What makes the mission and the message of a church community truly Christian and true to the gospel of Christ? Some might say – well it has to tell us how sinful we are and how much we need the gospel. Others might say: well it has to teach us about the Holy Trinity? Or it has to baptise people and teach them about Jesus. Or it has to be based on loving your neighbour. Well all of these things are part of the gospel of Christ in some shape or form; and certainly the last point – love your neighbour – is a deal closer to what the answer might be than some of the others – if we are looking for the things that really cannot be missed out. But there is another thing which too often gets overlooked.

The New testament letter of Paul to the Galatians tells of an episode in the formation of the early Christian church which gives us the possibly surprising answer. This was when Paul the Apostle, after 14 years of preaching the good news of Christ beyond the confines of the Jewish community, to the Gentiles, making followers of Christ and founding churches among people who had never been Jews, went back to Jerusalem finally to the founding apostles, Peter, James and John to make sure that what he had been preaching to the Gentiles was true and of God. Peter James and John agreed that Paul's gospel was authentic – that God had called Paul to take the gospel to Gentiles whilst they continued to go to the community of Jews. But they they asked of him only one thing and that was **“remember the poor”**.

In other word it turns out that remembering the poor is an indispensable criterion of authentic preaching of the gospel and Christian discipleship. Forget the poor and we are no longer preaching or living the gospel of Christ. For those early apostles Christian faith could not be conceived without solidarity with the poor. And if we take time to explore this further in the New Testament and early church writings we see that this applies not only to church members but spills out in compassion for all those in need.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said:

The Anglican Church is, like any other denomination, God's Church and ultimately nothing will prevail against its true teaching. We exist ultimately to advance God's kingdom of righteousness, love, compassion and caring, to be there on the side of the poor, the hungry, the despised”.

We are a country in which many people need hope for the future; individuals and families who need to see signs of care and compassion for them which will bring hope. As Christians and as the Church we need not be stuck in the gloom - because we can be the hope we seek for if we choose to be awake to the true light and to live by the light of Christ. We can be awake to the light and life God has for all people because of Jesus – because of the hope of Christ within us. Amen.

