

As One At 10

Isaiah 9 vs 1-7 – “A Light has Dawned”
Sunday 29th November (Advent 1)

Introduction

Every year, when November draws to a close the same questions are asked all across the globe – when is it appropriate for us to start listening to Christmas music and to set up the Christmas tree? When should I get the fairy lights out of the loft, and how soon can we legitimately prepare for Christmas?

Last week, when I was up at the Newton campus, I noticed a number of student flats already decorated. Fairy lights were up and communal kitchens were beginning to look festive. Milson Street too has its lights up in readiness to be switched on and there is a huge tree up and lit outside the abbey. And I confess....yesterday I went for a run listening to my favourites Christmas playlist. Christmas is coming

God started preparing for Christmas long before we might realize. Isaiah's famous prophecy concerning the child born to us was written around 500 years before the birth of Christ. Isaiah wrote at a time when life was dark and the people were distressed and suffering and as chapter 9 verse 1 says 'gloomy'. Ahaz was on the throne and he was a bad King who disobeyed God, and instead of standing with Israel against Assyria their common enemy, he had allied up with Assyria instead leading the kingdom of Judah to face attack from all sides! Things were not going well for the people of God.

Gloomy is perhaps a very apt word to describe the feeling of the nation as we come into our advent season. People are stressed, struggling and life for many feels dark and hopeless. And whilst people long for Christmas, often the struggles of life become more pronounced at a time when there is such an intensity around having a good time and enjoying yourselves. Not only will we be navigating the rules around how to bubble legally and safely over the Christmas period, grief for many will become more pronounced, money worries can become more significant and loneliness can become more acute.

Isaiah 9 very much speaks to us in this season, because it very much speaks to all broken people, living in a broken world and facing sin, sadness, sickness, fear, isolation, anxiety, broken relationships and the frustrations of daily life.

SO, whilst the situation 500 years before Christ was gloomy, and 2020 will probably be remembered as being gloomy this chapter speaks to us of **HOPE IN THE DARKNESS** as Isaiah begins with the promise verse 1 – “There will be no more gloom for those who were in the distress.”

No more gloom! Instead light has dawned, and with that hope has come.

I guess in the last few weeks of this pandemic we have seen some signs of hope – vaccines are on the horizon, we will be able to see some of our loved ones for a few days over Christmas and because of lockdown the virus is that little bit more under control.

Isaiah prophecies that where once the land of Naphtali and Zebulun were crushed by their enemies, God will in the future honour them as he honours Galilee. – What a wonderful hint that Jesus is coming and that this promise will be fulfilled when Jesus ministers in the area of Galilee as he walks from place to place bringing hope and teaching that the Kingdom of God is near!

A Great light has dawned and with that hope has come!

What hope this will be – nothing will be the same again. The darkness of the present will be banished and change will come. The people have been walking in darkness, living out their daily lives unable to see and overwhelmed by the shadows and gloom of sin, disobedience and judgement. But this great light is the promise that Jesus will come and that his salvation would be the ‘light for all gentiles’ – for all people.

The light that is coming will bring joy and lead people to rejoice – no longer will they be distressed. No longer will they be overwhelmed by darkness. God has not forgotten them. Will they begin to remember His past mercies and promises to them? Will they be reminded again of his love for them and his commitment to them? Will they turn toward the dawn or linger in the gloom – you see God is planning a rescue. He is looking beyond the judgement of those who are faithfulness like Ahaz, and he is offering a different future for all people for all time.

I wonder this Advent, and this Christmas whether we are will choose to focus on the light of Christ – Yes, this year has been hard and painful and a slog, but the light of Christ shines no less brightly – His light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot and will not overcome it.

Do you trust the hope that his light brings in this season? Do you trust that he has saved you and will return one day to bring you to his home for ever where there will be no darkness at all? Do you hold on to him, trust

Him, rejoice in his goodness and trust his promises. Has your joy increased as you have walked with Christ this year – what an opportunity we have in these next few weeks to be reminded of his goodness and love, and to choose to walk in the light with Him rather than linger in the gloom?

And as we do, others will see – as we deliver 1000 gifts to homes across the parish the light of Christ will shine in those places. As we gift hampers of food to some of the most struggling families in our community the light of Christ will shine in those places and hope will dispel the darkness.

How astonishing that this hope should come in the form of a child - **HOPE IN THE FORM OF A CHILD**

Have you ever chatted with a parent after the arrival of their child (particularly after their first child)? Within weeks we can find ourselves making outlandish claims about our baby – He is so advanced. She is so well-behaved. He smiled after a week. She is just so bright – a genius by the age of 18 months.

Isaiah makes some extraordinary claims about the one who is to come, who will banish the darkness and bring hope for all people.

In the last couple of chapters of the book, Isaiah has been prophesying about Immanuel – a child - ‘God with us.’ A child who may look like an improbable answer to the problem, but just as Gideon’s victory over the midianites was astonishing, so too will this child be, because he is not just any child – He is the light to banish all darkness.

He will be a royal son of David, (perhaps initially understood as Solomon, David’s literal son) but fundamentally the Messiah, God’s chosen and anointed one, described here as Wonderful Counsellor. One who is to come who will carry out supernatural, wonderful things that will cause the world to marvel at Him. No one will have the wisdom he has, and no one will speak as he does and have the effect that he has.

He will be mighty God – a warrior who brings unmatched strength and power. He is the creator of all things, who knows us and loves us. He is God himself and worthy of our worship and praise.

So too he is Everlasting Father, - he has the qualities of a perfect father – his heart is for those who are helpless, and his love and compassion is beyond all others. He is the everlasting son of the everlasting Father who gave up everything, for those he loved to the point of death.

Prince of Peace – He is the one who will grow up to enable peace between God and people, transforming lives and transforming all relationships...

This child is the Lord Jesus, the light of the world and this is the one about whom Isaiah prophesied – the one who grows up to be a man – the God-man who brings salvation for all those who trust Him and whose death and resurrection have brought peace between God and people. He is perfectly God and perfectly human, the only one who is perfectly wise, perfectly powerful, perfectly compassionate and perfectly able to deal with our sin and brokenness.

Yes, these are outlandish claims, but they are true claims, a trusted prophecy and a hope that God's people can rely on for all generations and all times.

As we come into Advent, this is the Jesus we prepare for. He has already proved himself and lived up to His name. He has already proved himself to be our eternal ruler and the only one who rules with complete justice. We remember his coming as a baby into poverty and obscurity. We remember him dying as a man in humility and obedience but we look forward to his return in all splendour and Glory. That is the hope that sustains us through a pandemic, economic insecurity, the grief of losing those we love, isolation and anxiety and a Christmas that we don't feel confident about.

CONCLUSION

Verse 7 ends with these words "The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this." – The salvation of the world is God's work! God has not forgotten his people. He had not forgotten Israel despite their disobedience and sin. He has not forgotten us in all our brokenness and sin too. God's loving plan was always to rescue his people – we've seen that as we have studied Exodus, and his plan was always to send his son as Isaiah foretold...

Let us not fret away the next few weeks as the world around us struggles to work out how to bubble, or get their gifts to family on time, or gets angsty over when to put on the latest Michael Buble album...let us rejoice and be joyful that in Jesus Christ the light has dawned, the darkness has been banished and we have hope for eternity with him. And let's take that good news out beyond our doors, as we spend time in our bubbles, and reach out into our community and parish.