**27th November 2011**

**Advent Sunday**

**Isaiah 64.1-9**

There’s an elderly couple, Fred and Ethel, who were walking down the street. It was a beautiful winter’s evening, and all the shopping centres and stores were festooned with light and Christmas displays. Then Fred and Ethel came upon a church with a small, dimly lit nativity scene on its tiny lawn.
“Look at that!” said Fred indignantly. “Now even the churches are trying to cash in on Christmas.”

The festive season is in full swing and it may leave you feeling indignant that the point of Christmas is lost amidst the commercial hustle and bustle. As we start Advent today, we start a new church year. The themes of Advent are longing, waiting and hoping for God to act and bring new life. Advent begins in darkness. We light one candle to express our hope in the growing light of Christmas. But Advent begins by recognizing the darkness in our world, with the hope and expectation of a new day.

So Advent begins in darkness. And our first reading in Advent from the book of Isaiah is a cry from the darkness: (Isaiah 64:1) "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" It is the anguished outburst of a desperate people, having exhausted all possible human alternatives, having given up on polite, respectfully restrained prayers to God. They cry, "Tear open the heavens and come down!" In other words, "Where are you, God? Where are you?" Isaiah prays the prayer of a people who long for God, yet cannot see or hear God, people for whom God is absent.

Do any of you know what that feels like? Have you ever prayed, but felt like you were only talking to yourself? Have you ever stood by the bed of a loved one in pain and prayed to God for help, but felt like God was far away? Have you known Isaiah's prayer: 'God, where are you? Tear open the heavens and come down! Please come!'

You can almost feel the ache in these passages from Isaiah.
If he had been writing today you would believe that he’s been watching the TV news and reading the newspapers, and he feels in his gut the daily litany of pain across the world. AIDS and starvation and war in Africa, sweatshops in Asia, global warming, the financial melt-down – these are not far-away “issues” to be discussed rationally and quietly. This is sin. This is evil. And it is to be raved at. Yelled at. Screamed at.

The people of Israel who are addressed by our passage today are a people struggling with what it means to be God’s people when God does not seem to be active. They are a people in exile, far from the land God promised them. They are a people under oppression from the Babylonians. They are a dislocated and abandoned people. They believe that God can and does act in history. They believe he has acted in the past (v.3), and they long for him to act in the present: ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down. (v.1)

But God doesn’t seem to hear their cries, and remains silent. So they wonder why this should be. They start to blame themselves – was it something they did which has caused God to grow angry and abandon them? Then they reflect that even if they did wrong, they only sinned because God had hidden himself from them (v.5).

The prophet expresses his frustration with God that ‘there is no one who calls on your name,’ and he doesn’t understand why God has hidden his face from us’ (v.7). He longs for a dramatic revelation of God in such a way as to turn all people to the truth. But what would God look like if he were to appear? Today’s passage uses natural imagery to describe how the prophet thinks God’s appearance should look: fire, earthquake, water (vv1-3). However, these are frighteningly similar to the images of terror that cause people to turn away from God, rather than towards God.

The people he is addressing are in exile. They are a disempowered, voiceless minority, surrounded by unbelief, and they are looking for God to prove his presence, and so justify their belief.

But God’s revelation seems frustratingly elusive.

I remember standing outside the chip shop as a sixth former and being part of a fierce debate with my fellow students as to whether God existed. One of my friends said why doesn’t God show himself. A few signs in the sky. The odd angel giving us a call now and again. Then we would be left in no doubt’

‘Well that is the problem’, I replied. *‘we would be left in no doubt’* . We are called to have faith and trust. One of the good things about God is subtlety. God is not in your face all the time. God respects your freedom. Those who seek will find.

One writer (Mike Riddell) put it like this. ‘*What we have in life and the world is nothing more than hints of God. These are as ephemeral as wisps of smoke highlighted in a stray beam of sunlight. Always ambiguous, these delicate hints are something akin to the fragrance of God’s presence. Once you have come to know the scent, your senses become keen to it and you are forever sampling the air to check for it. But if you don’t recognise it, you can continue about your business completely oblivious. I don’t think anyone was convinced about God by argument. The only path to knowing God is to have your eyes opened to someone who has always been there.*

*Our restlessness, our hunger for understanding, our dissatisfaction with the world as it is; our sense of purpose and direction, our intimations of significance, our awareness of being lured over the horizon; these all begin to make sense once we understand that our lives are not arbitrary or meaningless. There is a call forward in all of our lives.*

*Once our eyes are opened the world is full of God. In the glories of nature, the silence of the dawn as the sun haunts the sky; in the heaving seas as they connect with something in the depths of our souls. But God is also found in less likely places: around the meal tables in hostels for psychiatric patients; in the shining eyes of an old woman as she allows a memory to touch the surface of her mind; in the quiet and contented babbling of a baby.*

 *Those who are blind to divinity will see nothing other than what is obvious, while those who are enlightened will be overwhelmed by mystery and meaning. Love and God are not the same thing, but wherever love is God is not far away and vice versa.*

Isaiah then turns to a note of hope - verse 8: ‘You Lord are our Father: we are the clay, you the potter, and all of us are your handiwork. There is a statement of faith. We are loved by God, like a father loves his children. We are intimately his, like clay n the hands of a potter. We wait for God to act.

It was into this situation of waiting and longing for God to act decisively in history that Christ came. At the right time, in the right place, God acted in Christ Jesus. When God speaks words of salvation and release to the waiting people, the word was and still is ‘Jesus’.

God came down. That's what this season is all about: the day God came down to us.

Grandad found his grandson jumping up and down in his playpen, crying at the top of his voice. When Johnnie saw Gramps, he reached out his chubby little hands and said, "Out, Gramps, out." Gramps reached down to lift his grandson out of his predicament, but as he did, Johnnie's mom stepped up and said, "No, Johnnie, you are being punished. You have to stay in your playpen."

Gramps didn't know what to do. His grandson's tears reached deep into his heart. Mom's firmness couldn't be taken lightly. But love found a way. Gramps could not take his grandson out of the playpen; instead he climbed in with the little boy.

 God came down. The Word was made flesh. God in Christ moved in next door. God did tear open the heavens, not in the mighty way we expected, but when the angelic chorus burst forth in song at the birth, all heaven broke loose. God came down and walked as one of us. God came down and wasn't angry. God came down and, through an infant, said "I love you." (Billy D. Strayhorn)

The American theologian, Frederick Beuchner wrote,

‘*in the last analysis, you cannot pontificate, but can only point. A Christian is one who points at Christ and says ‘I can’t prove a thing, but there’s something about his eyes and his voice. There’s something about the way he carries his head, his hands. The way he carries his cross. The way he carries me.*

Advent is a time to remember like our ancestors in faith, we and all of humankind stand before God in "helplessness and need," There is simply sheer need for God: the pain of absence and the longing for God's presence" Or, as Anne Lamott has famously summarized the two basic prayers of the human heart: "Help me, help me," and "Thank you, thank you!"

 Advent is a time to remember that God's people are summoned to have the courage and the spiritual strength to remember that the holy breaks into the daily. To cry prayers of expectation. We go through times of expecting far too little, or nothing at all. At times, we become deadened to hope, because the world and its sadness seem to continue plodding along the same old road. The coming of Advent, jolts the church with the invasive news that it's time to think about fresh possibilities for deliverance and human wholeness. Dare we pray – O God come and help us!

No matter how bad things are, we are reminded that we belong to God, and that all the earth belongs to God, and we believe that God breaks into this reality regularly. Like a potter moulding clay are we being reformed and reshaped.

I am trying to finish my first essay for my Masters degree in Christina Spirituality at the moment. The essay is about how the views of the 16th century Reformers about salvation, grace and human nature influenced their spirituality. John Calvin, whose theological insights were foundational for the Reformed was notorious for his view of predestination. That God had preordained

Calvin married Idelette de Bure in 1540 and from the little we know they appear to have been very happily married. Yet their only son Jacques died shortly after he was born on 28 July 1542. Calvin expressed his grief to Pierre Viret: ‘The Lord has certainly inflicted a severe and bitter wound in the death of our infant son. But he is himself a Father, and knows best what is good for his children.’ In 1545 Idelette herself became ill, and in March 1549, after just nine years of marriage and with Calvin still under forty, she died.

Witness Calvin’s position and its pastoral power in his own life. What did he say following the death of Jacques? Not ‘It was beyond God’s control’. . But, vitally, the Lord God who inflicts is also, as Calvin says, ‘a Father himself’, our Father, who ‘knows best what is good for his children’. *Lord and Father*: Calvin often conjoins these two titles for God. He knows the pastoral power of this combined description. We see him using it here with himself, and elsewhere with others too. In the *Institutes* we read that the believer’s solace ‘is to know that his Heavenly Father so holds all things in his power, so rules by his authority and will, so governs by his wisdom, that nothing can befall except he determine it.’ See the pairing again: ‘Father’ with terms expressing sovereignty. Our Father has total power over everything, to order all to our good. It is awareness of God as our Father that keeps us from thinking that we are victims of a cruel tyrant, ‘as if God were making sport of men by throwing them about like balls’. Calvin therefore holds together knowledge of God as Lord and as Father.

Of this passage in Isaiah he wrote: you see how they put no confidence in anything but this; considering that they are the Lord’s they despair not of being the objects of his care.

He wrote to the French brethren:

Now when he permits his children to be afflicted, there is no doubt but that it is for their good. Thus we are forced to conclude that whatever he orders, is the best thing we could desire.

This is astonishing when we consider some of the suffering that Calvin endured. It is a conviction only possible through the work of the Holy Spirit. And it is true: ‘We are forced to conclude that whatever he orders, is the best thing we could desire.’ We have a *kind* Father and a *sovereign* Lord, so that we submit because he is sovereign, and we trust because he is our loving Father working for our good. Losing this, as the open theists have, is a pastoral disaster. As Calvin puts it: ‘Ignorance of providence is the ultimate of all miseries; the highest blessedness lies in the knowledge of it.’.

So what kind of God are we to proclaim to an unbelieving world? We proclaim a God who comes as a marginalized, voiceless, disempowered child. A God who follows the way of peace and non-violence. A God who challenges expectations of power and status. A God who is present in natural disasters identifying with the hurt, the dying and the bereaved. A God who redeems death and points to new life. A God who is our heavenly father. A God who is the Potter?

This advent, as we await the coming of Christ, amidst the frustration and despair of the world, may you find hope that God is our Eternal Father and we are in God’s care.

Mike Riddell *‘Sacred Journey’*

F Beuchner *‘Wishful Thinking’*

**Amen**.