

St Marc Grenoble

Sunday 4th December 2022 Advent 2

Isaiah 11: 1 - 10

Matthew 3: 1 - 12

'Look Forward in Hope'

Good morning everyone, both those here in Church and those joining on Zoom; thanks for joining us, whichever way you've joined us. As we start, **'Let's Pray'**

As usual, some questions to get us underway: If you joined us last week, you may remember it was the beginning of a special time in the Church year.

Who can remember what it's called? ... Yes, Advent ...and what does Advent mean? Yes, coming - we are preparing for someone coming. Who is it?? ... Yes, Jesus!

Did anything jump out at you in our readings today, the 2nd Sunday of Advent?

... Thank you

It's fair to say both today's readings are about looking forward hopefully, which is why they are important to read in Advent. But, the prophecy from Isaiah, which scholars tell me was around 2700 years ago, is the result of a vision he saw; and definitely doesn't start hopefully.

This part of the prophecy, foretells the destruction of the Assyrian Forest, (Is. 10: 33ff) which actually occurred about 100 years later. But that part of the story shows us God is perfectly able to use even the actions of people who don't believe in Him, to either punish, or reward His own people.

The prophecy continues, as we heard this morning: 'A shoot will come out from Jesse's stump' He could have said 'After the destruction, there will be a new beginning, a fresh start.' The prophecy speaks first of destruction and punishment from God, because the people of Judah have turned their backs on Him and wandered off in their own way; but it also offers hope for the future.

The vision promises that out of the destruction there would be a new beginning, 'a fresh shoot growing from the stump of Jesse; a fresh branch growing out of the old roots'. And, with the benefit of hindsight we realise this was foretelling the coming of Jesus (in God's own time - actually around 700 years later): They were promised: 'The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord. After the storm of punishment, they were promised the hope of a new beginning - in Jesus.

That is why Matthew's Gospel starts with the genealogy of Jesus - He is the prophesied shoot from the stump (or remains) of the family of Jesse Matt 1: 1-17

It is remarkable that God was promising all these things would happen; and they did - sometime hundreds of years later. It clearly shows that whereas we're lucky if we know what may happen next week; God's plans look out at eternity, He has a long term eternal view of His plans - past, present and future.

During the disobedience of the people of Judah, when they turned their backs on God, we read in the Old testament, that things became extremely difficult and bleak for them - does that ring any bells?? It sounds to me a lot like what is happening to our own wayward and corrupt culture right now; when governments and nations have wilfully turned their backs on God.

Be in no doubt, our world is a dreadful mess; simply because our culture and our nations have wilfully turned their backs on God; trying to pretend He doesn't exist. God is not happy, there is a price to pay and we are seeing the effects of that yet again. The world is in a total mess, and that is what happens when we stop paying attention to God.

We yearn for better times, as the people of Judah did, around 2700 years ago; But first we have to pay attention to God, just as John the Baptist was calling people to do more than 2,000 years ago.

As we move into the Gospel reading, I'm reminded of occasions in England and Wales, when I was loosely involved in various Royal visits of our late Queen. They always appeared to happen with ease, but I knew the preparations were intense.

Months in advance, officials inspected the place to be visited; they looked at the appearance and practicalities of the venue. They demanded redecoration (a brand new toilet exclusively for the Sovereign's use); they looked at the route – potential trip hazards, uneven roads and paths. Then, shortly before the visit, other officials came to talk about who might be permitted to meet her, and how she must be addressed. No one was to speak to her, unless she first spoke to them! No-one was permitted to touch her. Roads were repaired, even street furniture on the route was painted. (She probably thought everywhere always smells of new paint!)

Names of everyone invited were subject to security clearance, some were rejected. Finally, a day or so before the visit, security services 'swept' the area, checking for explosives and sealing everything; then the area was subject to 24 hour security until the arrival. Her car was preceded and followed by others, full of officials, and security officers, she had police motorcycle outriders and, if you looked, you saw men in suits, with earpieces and bulges under their arms, all around. Everyone was prepared for Her majesty's arrival. Then, often, as she entered, buglers sounded a fanfare. You certainly knew she had arrived! That was for the Queen of the United Kingdom.

John the Baptist's much more important job was to prepare for the arrival of the King of Kings. Although John didn't actually know for certain who He was! The King of Kings was on His way. John's role had been prophesied, (by Isaiah) hundreds of years before; 'The voice of one calling in the desert: "Prepare the way for the Lord" ' John's job was to go ahead, preparing the way. Warning people what they had to do.

Remarkably, people listened – they streamed out into the desert to see this weird prophet, dressed in clothes of camel hair, and living on a diet of grasshoppers and wild honey! (They're OK – a bit crunchy but the legs get stuck between your teeth!!). Crowds came to listen to John, and realised they weren't ready for the King's arrival.

Your home may be fine to live in – but if you knew a king was coming to visit you'd probably have an instant spring clean!!

That's what the Judean people tried to do with their lives – they knew they were in a mess; they confessed their sins, and asked John to give them a baptism of repentance. Thousands were baptised by him in the River Jordan; not just a sign of personal repentance, but an acknowledgement that God was doing something new.

They were expecting the arrival of the King of Kings in power and might! John said "I'm baptising you with water, for repentance. But the one who's coming is more powerful! I'm not even worthy to carry his sandals. He'll baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire! He's going to clear out the barn, gather the corn into the granary and burn up the chaff – the rubbish, with unquenchable fire.

No-one could say they hadn't been warned!

To John's dismay, we're told even some Pharisees and Saducees (Judean religious academics and fanatics) came to be baptised. 'You brood of vipers,' he said: 'Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? You had better make sure your actions match your words and you produce fruit in keeping with your repentance. The axe is already poised to destroy any tree that doesn't bear good fruit.' i.e. Don't play at it.

So, what does this all mean to us, this Advent?

At this time of preparation, we are also called to repent – to turn around, turn back to God; in preparation for the coming of our heavenly King. But, in the same way, this cannot be just a superficial act; it needs to be a total transformation of our lives.

This isn't about going through the motions, it is about a lifelong, all-consuming commitment to God's service. It isn't a short-term protest group causing a stir for a week or two, this is a commitment to serving the King of Kings - for eternity

Are you ready? Are you prepared? Are you willing to give your life to His service?  
Let's Pray ...