

Sunday 1st December 2013

St Barnabas, E17

Advent One: Faith

Today we enter the season of Advent. Advent means coming. It is a season of waiting, waiting for the coming of Jesus. We wait for the baby who waited himself in his mother's womb to become one with us. And, amazingly, we wait in the *faith* that this baby is none other but God, the God who stoops down to be one of us so that we might know forever that God understands all our vulnerabilities, understands the failings of our world, and works from within to bring healing and justice. That is what gives us *hope* that the world can change. That is what gives us the *courage* to co-operate with God. That is why we work for *peace* in expectation of the *joy* to come. *Faith, Hope, Courage, Peace, Joy*: these are the great themes of Advent and the themes I invite you to explore with me through our Advent and Christmas sermons this year.

So, today's sermon is on "faith". What kind of faith do we declare this Advent season? We speak of these great themes. We talk of hope, we talk of courage...we speak of justice, of Jesus as the Prince of Peace, as the one who

brings hope to the world. Are we blind to the world around us? Do we not see the suffering of the world? Do we not see that nations are continually at war with one another, that so many go hungry while others live in luxury, that our world is far from being a place of peace and justice?

We do see these things... and yet, we have faith that they are not the last word. Indeed, it is because we declare faith in Jesus that we are attentive to the injustice and violence of our world, that we do pay attention to homelessness, slavery to debt and food poverty, to the neglect of children and of the elderly, to the exploitation of workers and the plight of migrants, to the pollution of the seas and destruction of the rainforests, to all that shows our world failing to fulfil the purposes for which it was intended. We do see these things. We see them because God sees them. We see them because we know that in coming to be born among us, God made a decision to identify with our world as it is and to bring change from within.

He was born in Bethlehem, born to a people living under the cruel oppression of an occupying power, born as a homeless stranger, born to an unmarried teenager, forced to live his first years as a refugee. We wait for the one whom in coming, comes as one who identifies with the vulnerable,

identifies with the powerless, identifies with the oppressed, identifies with those subject to violence and injustice, identifies with all our frailty and all our feelings of being out of control. This is the Jesus in whom we have faith!

And we also have faith in the Jesus who died on the cross, who rose again, who defeated sin and death, not by a great show of military might, but by self-giving love. We have faith that Jesus' death shows us a new way of being within the world, shows us that love triumphs over hate, promises us a new kingdom of peace and justice. And yet, that is not something that comes immediately, it is something for which we have to wait. At the beginning of advent we remember that in particular, that we are in a time of waiting, waiting for Jesus to come again, waiting not just for our Christmas presents, but waiting for him to bring in that future kingdom we are promised, waiting for peace and justice for all, waiting for the second coming of Jesus.

In other words we are between the “now” of the world as it is and the “not yet” of the world as it is promised. I have taken inspiration this year Advent from resources produced by Church Action on Poverty and each week we will be using prayers from Church Action of Poverty when we light our advent candles. This is an organisation completely in tune

with so much of the desperate poverty in our society and not least at a time when more and more people are being forced into greater poverty by the welfare reforms of this government. Its newsletter tells many stories, including that of Kath from Stockton on Tees who turned to a loan company to try and cope with her shortage of money and found herself enslaved to debt as a result of the high-interest repayments. And yet the newsletter encourages us to keep alive that dream that we can build a just society where no one goes hungry, where no one is a slave to loan-sharks. This is what Christians, not least our Archbishop and our MP are doing in calling for the reform of money lending and we can thank God that the government has listened and agreed to put a cap on loans, leading at least to some reform of a broken society where many are trapped in poverty. We dream of a society where this will not be so and waiting, waiting in this time, waiting in the midst of the pain and suffering, violence and injustice or our world is what it means to have faith.

Do we give up? No! We hold fast? Are we affected by the things we know are not right? Yes, acutely affected, cut to the core, we too feel the pain and yet we are not crushed: we have faith. Faith, Paul tells us, is the assurance of things yet unseen and we have that assurance. We have that faith that

something better is coming and that all our efforts in co-operating with God to make peace, justice and love are signs, signs of what is to come, acts of faith, symbols of hope, works of courage, moments of peace and joy.

We are not optimists or pessimists, we are realists. We know the world as it is and we have faith that it will not remain as it is but will give way to something better, something glorious, where peace will reign, where swords will indeed be turned to ploughshares, where Jerusalem and the whole earth will know peace, where the works of darkness will be no more. We do not know when it will come...we are told it will come at an unexpected hour...but we have faith that it will come. And in the meantime we can take our inspiration from Isaiah, that the thing to do is plod on, to walk in his paths, to steadily make our way towards that promised place, represented by making pilgrimage to Jerusalem. We just keep going, putting one foot in front of the other, plodding on and on, not in despondency, not weighed down by our problems and the problems of our world, but determined, steadfast, walking in confidence that Jesus will come again, walking in the belief that war or injustice shall be no more, walking with all our pain and vulnerability, walking in advent hope, walking, walking and waiting, waiting in faith! Steven Saxby, December 2013.