

Year B Advent Sunday

Isaiah 64: 1-9

1 Cor 1: 3-9

Mark 13: 24-37

Waiting In Hope

The theme of Advent Sunday, the first day of the new liturgical year is hope.

Perhaps you are wondering what is there to hope for? And maybe you are wondering if you have been experiencing Advent, a period of anticipation and waiting since 23rd March when the first national lockdown began? If so, it is the longest Advent season ever, starting ironically just two days before Mary was visited by the Angel Gabriel and where Mary said 'Yes!' to being the mother of God!

Maybe by now you think hope is in short supply and have been wondering where God has been these last nine months; the God of massive gestures of salvation, of healing, of reconciliation, of putting all things right.

And yet, here we are, with just 26 days until Christmas Day. We already know what it is that God will deliver on that day. His massive earth-shattering action was.... A vulnerable baby, born to a teenager with an older husband who scraped his living as a carpenter.

I wonder if the lessons of the last nine months have been to look not for the global signs of God's presence, or in fact what seems to be God's absence, but to look for God's presence in so many small things that all go to build up a stirring and challenging understanding of how God's kingdom is built, person by person, small acts of hope, peace, joy and love upon other small acts of hope, peace, joy and love?

I so want God to act in a massive game-changing way; to irradiate hunger, poverty, injustice, wars, violence and power-hungry autocratic rulers, and just plain selfish and egotistical people who only care for themselves.

But I know in my heart of hearts that God seldom works in that way. Yes, the Bible gives us great examples of sweeping 'game-changing' moments, but mainly what we see, and especially in the New Testament is the work of those who sought to follow the example of Jesus. Jesus, God-with-us, was a 'game-changer', and his example led others to pursue 'the way' and work to bring God's kingdom on earth.

When I stop and contemplate these last nine months, I can see God at work; in so many small ways. Each small action is like a piece in a jigsaw; we need to look for the pieces and fit them together to see the bigger picture. What have you seen? A good neighbour doing shopping for someone shielding? A volunteer delivering books, games, toys, clothes to those in need? A volunteer supporting the work of a foodbank? A neighbour taking someone else's dog for a walk? A group deciding to keep paths clear of overhanging bushes? An exhausted care worker taking a double-shift because of staff shortages? A nurse, a porter, a ward secretary donning PPE day after day and doing what they can to care for the unwell, scared for the health of their family should they unwittingly bring COVID19 into their homes? And scientists, clinicians, statisticians and volunteers creating and testing vaccines so that we can mix together again; share fellowship, communion, meals, conversations around a table, not staring into a screen?

When we really listen to today's readings I hope you were shocked. I always find myself shocked when I sit and contemplate them. Isaiah pleads for the absent God to 'open the heavens and come down', and Mark paints a picture of a Godless world that none of us want to experience. Strangely, whilst celebrating the new liturgical year,

these readings encourage us to lament and connect with the truth of our feelings, and frankly, let rip. We are to describe the world as it is, as we see it.

Then we are invited to wait, for that is what Advent is after all. For some of us this is a continuation of the waiting that started mid-March. And in this period of active waiting, I am sure we can see God at work in so many people and so many places. In a period of active waiting, we are invited to reflect on hope, and I believe, to see how we have been and may be called to be agents of God's hope in the world going forward.

Waiting is not a time for despair. It is a time to gather those jigsaw pieces together and see what picture they create when we start putting them together.

Waiting is a time to consider what small piece you may be in this jigsaw. What is your contribution to the much bigger picture of hope, peace, joy and love being created. For with sufficient jigsaw pieces imbued with hope, imbued with love, imbued with joy and imbued with peace., there will be far less room for pieces that don't have these qualities.

Waiting is not to be an unproductive time. Just the opposite.

Over the next 26 days, I invite you to consider what you can do to look at the signs of God's kingdom coming, to help you wait with wondrous expectation, and most of all with hope. And I wonder if you yourself might be one of those signs, just by waiting with wondrous expectation and hope?

As we hold our AGM after this service, we shall look back at the last year. However, that is where we have been, not where we are going. It tells us about who we were and where we came from, important things to know; important only in so far as they should equip us to

keep moving forward with hope. In this last year we have learnt that what we knew and the tools we used were no longer relevant. We have adapted, we have survived and I think in facing the challenges with enthusiasm and spirit, we have all grown in faith and shown just how adaptable we can be, to continue to support God's mission here in Penicuik.

Waiting in hope is an act of faith and love. It is an act of preparing for whatever may come. We know that we are waiting for God-with-us to once again burst into our lives and start yet again the cycle of His presence amongst us.

Waiting in hope may help us see where, in this next year we are being called to be part of God's mission. Are we up to the challenge, the who-knows-what-it-will-be 'thing' that we are called to be part of? We may not know what we are waiting for in terms of what we may be called to do, but we do know who we are waiting for.

May your waiting be a productive time of preparation, may you be full of hope, getting ready to respond.