

Sermon 4th Advent 2018, St. Catherines, Stuttgart

Isaiah 7.10-16 , Romans 1.1-7, Matthew 1.18-25

Does the world sometimes seem particularly complex and its darkness unrelenting and overwhelming?

In a recent conversation a young man said to me: “You live in a different world. You don’t know the real world”. What I think he meant was: ‘You are living in a kind of protected world; in reality it’s a tough and often nasty and dark world out there.’ And the subtext to that was: ‘this is because, firstly you belong to a different generation - the world has moved on; and secondly, you are in the business of religion – that is like having a cushion around you.’ Or to change the metaphor: ‘you can afford not to get your hands dirty’. I thought that was somewhat unfair but also wrong, however what I answered was:” I know more about the dark side of life than you think; but I also know about the light and that it is the light that will have the last word.” He didn’t say anything to that, and I am thankful for the response I found.

I am sure that others here this morning also from time to time feel the weight of all that is wrong with the world at large, in our work place, in our neighbourhood, in our families, in our own lives and even in our churches. We know too well that as Christians we are by no means protected from these realities; we are neither immune to experiencing them nor even against contributing to unhappiness, hurt and injustice. We not only know about the so-called ‘real world’, we are very much part of it. Most importantly, such intractable situations often confront us with very difficult choices. We would like to see, our way, but can’t: social pressures, so-called expert views and loyalties often cloud rather than clear our discernment.

Advent is a time in which we can face up to this; when in fact it is good to do so. Not because we thereby gain any merit, or because it makes us feel better. (Of course it is important for us to be self-aware, to be reminded that as Christians we do not belong to a special species, that we too compromise with what is wrong.) But more importantly, Advent is a time to remind ourselves of the light that has come in to the darkness of the world and into my life, and come to stay. We have, so to speak, a de-fault position, and that de-fault position brings healing, reconciliation and peace. We can ‘fall back’ on the assurance we have been given that God is with us and at work in this world.

Both our readings today, the one from Isaiah and our Gospel from the first chapter of Matthew tell of the choice that lay before two individuals under very difficult circumstances: King Ahaz of Judah, and Joseph, Mary’s husband-to-be.

Ahaz reigned in the second half of the 8th Century before Jesus’ birth, in a time when the big powers of Syria and Assyria were at war. Judah was being threatened by Assyria and the neighbouring kingdom of Israel which had cast its lot with Assyria. Ahaz is very frightened, even though Isaiah had already given him God’s message that he had nothing to fear. His own advisors, however, urged him to submit to Assyria. And so Isaiah challenges him to give ” sign” to confirm his obedience to God rather than to his earthly advisors. But Ahaz refuses; he trusts in his advisors and his own political intelligence rather than in God. Isaiah stands his ground on behalf of God and gives Ahaz God’s sign: A young woman will bear a son who will be called Immanuel, ‘God with us’. In Ahaz’ day that would have been understood to mean that God would ensure the continuity of

the 'house of David' in a dynastic sense. That prophecy echoed on in the mind and hearts of the Jewish people down the centuries, and was fulfilled in terms most unexpected.

Some 700 years later Matthew, the writer of the Gospel picks up on this sign when he tells of the circumstances that led to Jesus' birth. Joseph, the carpenter and distant descendant of King David had found out that his betrothed was pregnant. Soberly and pragmatically the story is told, though the circumstances for the couple were dramatic. For Joseph was a righteous man from a respected family and had a reputation to guard. Joseph wanted to dissolve the engagement quietly and gentleman-like. But then he had a dream in which a messenger from God told him to take Mary as his wife. This dream became a defining moment in his life. He could have dismissed it as only a dream, rationalising away his conscience. However, Joseph chose to act on the sign given in the dream. The 'sensible' decision of getting out of the agreement was no longer an option. He took that most difficult step to stand by Mary and the child she bore, against all the censorship of the society around them. We hear little of Joseph in the ensuing years, except that he fled to Egypt with the mother and child to protect them from Herod's murdering rage and that he provided a stable home and livelihood for the family in which Jesus grew up. In acting on this sign from God, however, he became a key person in the story of Immanuel, God coming to us in the flesh and living among us. Ahaz chose to step out of the light of taking God's salvation forward; Joseph's choice puts him at the heart of what God did in Jesus Christ and what God continues to do.

This is the reassuring message on this 4th Sunday in Advent. We can trust God to be with us as the Light that is not engulfed by the threatening darkness, as the One who came humbly into the world and shared our life in all its complexity, sinfulness and unrelenting injustice, but came out victorious. This helps us discern the signs which God gives even to us, however little sense they seem to make in terms of our world, but which give us heart to act on God's call to witness to this child Immanuel, 'God with us'. May we indeed recognise and act on these signs to help usher in the Saviour this Christmas and in the year that lies ahead. **Amen.**