

## ADVENT 2

4 DECEMBER 2022

Isaiah 11. 1-10

Psalm 72. 1-7, 17-19

Romans 15. 4-9a, 12-13

Matthew 3. 1-12

I wonder what you imagine the Christian notion of repentance to be? What happens in you when you hear the word? Is it a positive feeling or a negative one? I experience something of an inner cringe, shaped probably I think with too much exposure to evangelical concerns with personal peccadillos when I was a teenager; that repentance is about *not* doing things.

John the Baptist – which is his real title – appears in the wilderness calling people – repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. The location of John the Baptist’s ministry is an interesting one in the life of Israel; in Israel’s imagination. John is at the Jordan in the wilderness. The Jordan is a threshold kind of place – looming large in Israel’s self-identity. It was from out of forty years in the wilderness that the tribes of Israelites fleeing slavery emerged and crossed over the Jordan into the land of promise. Not for nothing is John here. There is something about this location and the call to repentance in which there is an echo of the identity to which the liberated slaves were being called as the people of God. Out of the wilderness, baptised through the waters of the Jordan to being the people of God.

The word repentance comes from the ancient Greek word *metanoia* and means, not so much turning away from as turning toward. When I ask, does the word have negative connotations or positive, it really is a word which invites a calling toward life. It is profoundly positive. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Don’t turn your back on God, turn toward God and God’s reign. The readings from the prophet Isaiah and the longings of the psalmist for the reign of King Solomon give us a sense of the nature of this reign.

We as Australian’s know that at some point in the not-too-distant future we will have to consider whether we want to abandon the institution of the British monarchy as our head of state. While many of us have admired and respected the Queen over her long reign, the future question for us will be: do we want to be tied up with that British institution; the system and all it represents.

Isaiah and the psalmist are looking forward to a reign but their concern is not with an institution but with a state of affairs. This tension between a particular individual’s reign and the character of that reign have come to the fore in the transition from Queen Elizabeth to King Charles. While Elizabeth was honoured for her personal character, there were rightly accusations that terrible atrocities were committed during her reign – in particular early on against the Mau Mau in Kenya – a legacy which is still playing out seven decades later.

The biblical scholar Brendan Byrne describes this reign of God, not as an institution but as a state of affairs - the character of a society. It is when through history that men – and it’s always men – have tried to tie God to the institution of a particular reign that we get things so appallingly wrong. Witness the support of the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox church for what Putin is doing in Ukraine. Truly a scandalous heresy.

What usually happens amongst clergy each year as Advent approaches and the prospect of readings of apocalyptic climaxes of history and violent images of judgement are to be heard that we tend to want to run away. These readings are difficult. But the images remind us of the justice of God, a justice present so consistently through both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, for a state of affairs that involves justice and compassion, a justice characterised by generosity and equity.

with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;  
... Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

May he judge your people with righteousness,  
and your poor with justice.  
May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,  
and the hills, in righteousness.  
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,  
give deliverance to the needy,  
and crush the oppressor.

And while I say that the reign of God is not about an institution the reign of God is nevertheless an embodied reign – embodied in a ruler who sees that this Godly state of affairs comes about and is preserved?

This last couple of weeks I have become tired of the news; tired of the constant litany of suffering and injustice and of one individual or group oppressing another, tired of the negative state of affairs across the globe: the treatment of women in Iran, the oppression of the Chinese people by their own government, the ongoing tribal and racial trauma in African nations – the legacy of colonialism still not resolved, the cancer that is the middle east, the invasion of Ukraine and the determined cruelty against the Ukrainian people, the inability of governments to really collaborate on the climate crisis, the polarisation of US society. Lord have mercy. The voice of the psalmist echoes in my ears: How long, O God, How long?

I wonder about those who cry out in the face of this suffering, where their voice comes from. Those women in Iran, the Chinese people tired of autocratic rule, the people of Africa longing to live in dignity and safety, racial and religious minorities of the Middle East seeking autonomy and dignity, the people of Ukraine seeking self-determination after decades, if not centuries of Russian subjugation, the meek of the earth impacted by the climate crisis already. Where do their voices come from?

Often as we approach Christmas through Advent we hear from the prophet Isaiah – chapter 40 – comfort, O comfort my people, it begins. In this passage we read:

A voice says, ‘Cry out!’  
And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’  
All people are grass,  
their constancy is like the flower of the field.

<sup>8</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades;  
but the word of our God will stand for ever.

During Advent we faithfully prepare for marking Christmas. There is so much we get caught up in in the lead-up, though, and we often complain that there is too much to do, but there is something about all this preparation, about getting ready to hear the word, hear the story again. An anticipation. The church is custodian of this story, keeper of this treasure and each year at Christmas we bring this treasure out, we prepare ourselves to hear it, to celebrate it, to sing it, to re-enact it; to tell it to a new generation of children - this story about the reign of God being seen in our midst. To hear this word which stands forever.

We fret about whether the church has anything to say anymore, whether anyone *is* listening, or has in fact heard. I feel we count our numbers of attendees at Christmas with a certain trepidation about whether people might still be interested – think it might be worth hearing the story again and so might carve time out in the Christmas schedule to make it to church. It's clear to me that they do care; that the story of God with us does matter.

As we prepare to hear the account of the angels and the shepherds and the heavenly cry: *peace on earth, good will to all*, we hear it echoed in the cry of the oppressed of Iran, the middle east, of Africa and Ukraine. We hear the voices of the oppressed echo the voice of the angels

As we celebrate and look for the divine peace on this second Sunday of Advent we are called to a watchfulness which is restless and hopeful; a restlessness which is not satisfied with less than the peace by which human dignity flourishes and abounds. God looks for it; we look for it. We proclaim the divine peace and as we hear again the interruption of time by the prince of peace, we commit ourselves again to being part of this reign.

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