

Second Sunday in Advent 08 December 2013

Isaiah 11: 1 - 10; Psalm 72: 1 - 7, 18 - 21; Romans 15: 4 - 13 ; Matthew 3: 1 - 12



Illustration 1: Advent 1

These sermon notes were prepared before the sermon was delivered and so do not transcribe the actual sermon word for word

We continue this week exploring the prophetic insight of Isaiah as part of our Advent preparations for Christmas; and again we find Isaiah looking beyond the everyday and seeing both the possibility and the reality of ‘A New Creation’.

It is a timely reminder to us all, we also have the capacity to see beyond and we have the capacity to bring to birth new realities.

Timely here to share a quote, the first one that came into my inbox following the death of Nelson Mandela: “*Sometimes, it falls upon a generation to be great. You can be that great generation. Let your greatness blossom.*” [Nelson Mandela]

Isaiah shares a similar perspective, for he does not see a supernatural saviour coming from outside to bring this new reality into being; rather, “*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*” Isaiah sees that the reality and the possibility for tomorrow is earthed and grounded in us.

When we read the full passage and see what Isaiah’s vision is, we will see that it is an un-Australian insight, it is a counter-cultural perspective for Isaiah’s vision is not shaped by fear, self-interest or apathy; it is energised by equity, the honouring of diversity and finds a harmony in righteousness.

Wisdom and understanding, rather than economic rationalism, provide the “*spirit of counsel*” that guides the new creation into reality. It is both vision and Divine reality that Isaiah speaks of, and his vision is one we can so easily translate for ourselves:

“*The wolf shall live with the lamb*”: can this be true for refugee & resident?

“*the leopard shall lie down with the kid*”: can this be true for same-sex couples?

“*the calf and the lion and the fatling together*”: can this be true for Arab, Israeli and Palestinian?

“*the lion shall eat straw like the ox*”: can this be true for both rich and poor?

And to make this vision even more challenging, Isaiah tells us: “*a little child shall lead them.*”

This is the line that leads us, or points us toward, the Nativity and to Matthew’s child in a manger.

However, we should appreciate that Isaiah is not predictive of Christ’s birth, for that understanding trivialises the wisdom in Isaiah’s ancient words and trivialises his vision for a new creation.

What we can more correctly appreciate is that Matthew sees Christ as a realisation of Isaiah’s vision, and even that appreciation is somewhat lacking.

What is important for us as we seek to encounter for ourselves the mystery, the and the gift of Christmas, is that both Isaiah and Matthew see that the reality of a new creation is grounded and birthed with us.

2

In our second reading today, Paul writes to encourage the church at Rome, which included both Jews and Gentiles, and he writes in the light of his own encounter/appreciation of Christ and with reference to Isaiah's vision, which he would have been very familiar with.

Paul's encouragement, like the gospel message that Christ reveals, and like Isaiah's vision is of the movement into a unified harmonious creation, and so he encourages the Romans to "*live in harmony with one another*" and "*Welcome one another*".

Paul does not write about border security initiatives, and nor does he encourage the breaking of international treaties that seek to support refugees and other vulnerable people.

As we explore the visions of Isaiah and of Paul, what becomes clear is that for us, as we contemplate in Advent a new creation to be birthed at the nativity, what is clear is that a divine vision of tomorrow will not be realised with more of the same.

And that reality check is underlined in today's gospel and in the proclaiming voice of John the Baptist who calls us to: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*"

Church teaching has over-simplified our understanding of John's call to repent and it is worth a moment to explore more fully what John was saying, and meaning.

In the New Testament, the word translated as 'repentance' is the Greek word *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*), "after/behind one's mind", which is a compound word of the preposition 'meta' (after, with), and the verb 'noeo' (to perceive, to think, the result of perceiving or observing).

In this compound word the preposition combines the two meanings of time and change, which may be denoted by 'after' and 'different'; so that the whole compound means: 'to think differently after'. *Metanoia* is therefore primarily an after-thought, different from the former thought; a change of mind..... and change of conduct, "change of mind and heart", or, "change of consciousness".

John is calling for a new perception, a new observing, a new vision that will be creative of change, and of a new way of living and being as we bring to birth that Divine vision of a new tomorrow.

And in verse 8 John encourages his hearers to "*Bear fruit worthy of repentance*"; we are being called in Advent to prepare so that we can bring about the changes that will be creative of the Divine vision.

John the Baptist is an important icon in our Advent preparations and serves to help us as we seek to encounter the reality of Christmas.

He is often portrayed as forerunner, the one who points toward Christ, as so too is often seen and appreciated as an icon of the church, which also seeks to point toward a life 'in Christ'.

If we contemplate this icon and look at the process that John reveals to us; the pointing toward Jesus is a simplified, even trivialised understanding, for as we see in today's text there is no Jesus within John's horizon.

In fact John only sees and recognises Jesus when Jesus comes to him; John is pointing beyond himself, he is pointing to that which is beyond, in the same way that Isaiah was.

Isaiah, Paul and John the Baptist all reveal an important 'Advent' process, that is, the pointing away from ourselves... We will encounter this same process later in the year as we explore the gospel of Matthew: "*those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*" [Matthew 10:39]

Advent is a valuable time to engage the process of Bringing to birth, and so is a valuable time for us to realise and bring to birth ourselves, the image of God and the creators of tomorrow.

If we see Isaiah as pointing to Christ, and John the Baptist as pointing to Christ then Christmas can be a celebration of Christ's birthday, a remembering of a past event.

However if we can contemplate the vision, insight and perception of these icons and the wisdom in these ancient texts, then like Paul we might be moved to participate in bringing about 'A new creation' and bringing to birth a Divine tomorrow.

Christ is revealed in the gospel's as a revelation of fulfilment, in Christ the possibility is enfleshed in reality, not as an event in time, but as an illustration for us of our fullest humanity.

The Nativity, is an icon of our birthing into a divine vision, and a divine reality of life, and it is a reality that forever asks us to be like John, and point beyond ourselves, to have an orientation to others, to realise that life is made Divine in and through our giving.

"Sometimes, it falls upon a generation to be great. You can be that great generation. Let your greatness blossom."

[Nelson Mandela]