

## Reflective Worship 4<sup>th</sup> Dec 2022

### Advent - Fast

Isaiah 40

Dressing up in a purple costume for my role as a Wise (wo)Man in Journey to the Stable this week reminded me of the poem 'Warning', by Jenny Joseph

“When I am an old woman, I shall wear purple  
With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.  
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves  
And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.”

I love that poem. It seems to me that it's about accepting older age with open arms – seeing its possibilities rather than just its downsides. Though I have to say that whatever the grandkids might think, for me “old” means at least 15 years older than whatever age I am when I re-read it!

“When I am old...., I shall wear purple”.

It could apply to the calendar year as well, as the church's liturgical year moves into the purple of Advent. Purple – the colour of repentance and of the times in the year when Christians have traditionally been called to fast, to prepare, to wait.

Waiting and preparing ourselves to recall and celebrate the birth of Jesus

Waiting and preparing ourselves for when he will return in glory.

The original recipients of Isaiah's prophecy were waiting too.

Decades before this prophecy was delivered, the nation of Israel had become so corrupt that the prophet Ezekiel had seen a vision of the presence and glory of the Lord God departing from the Temple in Jerusalem. Without God's protection, the Israelites had been overwhelmed by the Persian empire, and most of its population taken off into exile, 600 miles away in Babylon.

And Babylon was where they were still languishing – longing to return to their own country, their own worship, their own God.

For the exiles also knew that, as well as warning them of the consequences of their unfaithfulness, God had also said through an earlier prophet, Hosea, that the time would come when he would re-establish his covenant with them. Once again say “You are my people, and I am your God.”

So they were faithfully waiting; repenting and preparing themselves for the day when they could return to Jerusalem, rebuild the temple, resume their worship, and re-establish their covenant relationship with the Living God.

And it is into this expectant waiting that Isaiah speaks these words from God.

“Comfort my people,” God instructs. “Encourage them. Get them ready. You are returning. I am returning. I have spoken.”

Their time of waiting is almost over. Not because of who they are, but because of who God is.

“People are fallible, but *my word* stands forever.”

The exiles in Babylon listened to God’s word, and heard the promise of God’s return to Jerusalem – of how nothing would stand in His way when he came. And the promise that they too would return and be reunited with him.

600 years later, John the Baptist listened to the same word of God, and heard the promise of God’s coming to his people as Jesus; as well as the story of the return of God and the exiles to Jerusalem,

2,000 years later, we listen to the same word of God, and hear God’s promise that Jesus will come again and restore all things, as well as the story of God’s coming to his people as Jesus; as well as the story of the return of God and the exiles to Jerusalem.

“And we hear...”

Or do we?

Advent is a time to listen, to wait. To put aside all but the essentials. To fast.

Yet the only sort of fast that most of us now experience during Advent is the speed of the days between “now” and the Big Day. Is there still time to ice the cake, make the puddings, buy the presents, write the cards, sort out who is looking after Great Aunt Mildred this year, decide which visitors get the beds and who will be sleeping on mattress on the floor?

And probably for many of us – fitting in time to do a stint at the Tree Festival, to bake for the cake stall, to prepare craft for Messy Church, to choose the carols for Midnight Mass, to plan for Angels @ the Crib, to ask a friend to come to the Carol Service, to invite that grieving neighbour to the Memorial service.

And find time to recover from Journey to the Stable.

Until Christmas comes.

And goes.

... And leaves us unchanged.

Really? Really??

“Comfort my people,” God instructs. “Encourage them. Get them ready.”

So what can we learn from Isaiah’s exiles about how to wait?

In anticipation.

I once heard someone speaking about the word translated as “comfort”. They said it didn’t mean comfort as in a cosy armchair, but had a sense of being kicked up the backside. Encouraged to get ready. Maybe think of it more as practising, or getting into training. Preparing our hearts, souls, and minds – as well as our bodies – to welcome the Christ child.

So, how do we - each one of us individually- need to prepare to welcome the Christ-child? What stands between us and the wonder of recognising that God came to live among us as a helpless baby?

In trust.

There’s a worship song which goes  
Our God is an awesome God  
He reigns in heaven above  
In wisdom, power and love  
Our God is an awesome God.

And then it repeats over and over again. Same words. A bit like a chant.  
I looked it up – ten identical verses. A bit repetitive maybe – but by the end the message has somehow sunk in.

Our God *is* an awesome God.

Isaiah may have been more lyrical in the words he spoke, but the content is the same. The Creator God is more powerful than we will ever comprehend....  
...and yet, he is also the good shepherd, who understands our needs. And our weaknesses. We can trust him.

So, how do we - each one of us individually - need to trust in this child, whose power is endless, yet whose love brought him to a manger-bed? Where in our lives do we need not only to believe in our heads that there is a God, but to trust him in the ins and outs of our daily lives?

With confidence.

“God... does not faint or grow weary.  
His understanding is unsearchable.”

“...Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength  
They shall mount up with wings like eagles  
They shall run and not be weary  
They shall walk and not faint.”

We are fallible human beings. We get tired, weary, grumpy, say things we don't mean, and don't say the things we need to. We find reasons to hold on to grudges. We build barriers rather than bridges. We allow the fear of rejection to overcome the generosity of invitation. We lock uncomfortable things away and allow them to fester, rather than bravely getting them out into the light, so they can be dealt with.

And we get distracted - too busy to listen to God, or even just to rest in him.

And God knows all this – and amazingly and inexplicably, he still loves us. “His understanding is (truly) unsearchable.” And he promises us his strength to deal with all these things.

So, how do we - each one of us individually - resolve to open ourselves to God's strength to keep going. To tackle these fractured relationships with others – and with God himself. To invite, to welcome, to make the highway straight – to see possibilities rather than wasteland?

Big questions. Many questions. Advent is too short to consider them all.

So in a time of quiet, let's consider just one.

Preparation to receive the Christ-child

Trust

Confidence in God's strength to keep going on our Christian journey

And maybe to commit to spending some time each day in God's company, pondering these things, as our slow Advent fast.