

Isaiah 64.1-9, 1 Cor 1.3-9, Mark 13.24-end

Isaiah 64.1-9

¹O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—

²as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—

to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

⁴From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.

⁵You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

⁶We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

⁷There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.

⁸Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

⁹Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity for ever. Now consider, we are all your people.

1 Cor 1.3-9

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— ⁶just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— ⁷so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Mark 13.24-end

The Coming of the Son of Man

²⁴ 'But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,

²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶ Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. ²⁷ Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

²⁸ 'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³² 'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵ Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶ or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

⁸ *Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.*

³³*Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come....*³⁷*And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'*

Yesterday, the Advent newsletter from a friend in a religious community arrived, which opened with the following words:

'It's true: the world is in a mess. The Church is in a mess..., and if we are honest, one way or another, most of *us* are in a mess. Then he went on to say: Those of us who regularly pray the psalms and listen to the Scriptures, realise that this is not a new phenomenon.'

Today: as we come together on the first Sunday of Advent, listen to our scripture readings, especially Isaiah and the reading from Mark's gospel, we recognise what he is talking about.

We live in a world which is a mess. The news reports from Israel and Gaza – the Land of the Holy Ones – is disconcerting, to say the least. So, we, too, want to shout:

⁶⁴ O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—² to make your name known to your adversaries,

so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

And of course, it's not only Israel, Gaza and Palestine; the destruction and suffering in Ukraine is horrendous, as are the situations of so many people in other parts of the world, just to mention the Congo or Eritrea.

How much do we all long for a 'Saviour' to come and put an end to the fighting and suffering; a saviour who leads the way to ending the spirals of conflict and suffering, of rage and hatred – a saviour who makes all see our common humanity and shows the way to live together in harmony.

Our scriptures are written for people seeking God, often in the midst of great political and social struggle. The passage from Isaiah is part of the final eleven chapters of the book and reflects the challenges the Israelites were facing during the Persian period. Some Israelites taken into exile by the Babylonians had now returned to Jerusalem under Persian sponsorship. That led to disputes between those now returning and the Israelites who had stayed in Jerusalem; it led to disputes over status, social standing, political and religious authority. It's not clear who exactly the antagonists are in the

passage – whether it the external colonial power, Persia, or whether the prophet is speaking about internal power struggles. In any case, the prophet laments the shortcomings and transgressions of the people. They have turned their backs on God – but without God there is no flourishing. Human beings are not in control – our dealings with each other, our relationships need God and God’s healing. Like the Israelites then, far too often, we keep God out of the way – or in a box, contained, we keep God’s power at arm’s length. Isaiah reminds us that God cannot be contained – that in fact, without God, we cannot flourish – we fade like a leaf. It is only when we acknowledge God, -as Isaiah does : Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. – then, there is hope, hope for us and for our world.

Turning to our reading from Mark’s gospel, here, too we have a passage that can only be properly understood, if we look at the political and religious context in which it was written. It is the second half of chapter 13, which contains the single longest speech by Jesus in Mark’s Gospel, just before Jesus goes to his death and resurrection. At the start of the chapter, coming out of the temple, Jesus predicts it’s destruction, which happened during the first Jewish-Roman war, in the year 70. Jesus’ speech, with its apocalyptic imagery, speaks directly into the experience of the early Christian community caught in the events of that war and the persecutions of Nero. So, here , too, we have a scripture passage that comes from a context where the world is a mess – the opposite of what we would call good news – and yet – Mark’s gospel, the first gospel to be written, during those years of war, opens with the words ‘ The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ’.

Today, on the first Sunday of Advent, a season of expectation, watching and waiting, our readings acknowledge the tragic reality of the human condition, and the longing for a Saviour; for God to make Godself known. And, of course, they also offer us hope.

In Isaiah, it is the acknowledgement that we need to turn and allow God to be in charge – to allow the potter to form the clay; in Mark’s gospel it is the ‘good news of our Lord Jesus Christ and promise that the Son of Man will come, with his angels. However, we need to be, awake, alert, ready.

It is tempting for us to say ‘if God is almighty’, why does God not do anything about this? Or, to say – like the psalmist – where O God are you. Do you exist?

The Jews in Jesus' time were looking for God to send a 'messiah' to sort it all out. God sent a messiah – but he didn't sort it out in the way people expected. He modelled a very different approach. He began small! – a very tiny baby! Saying "don't look to some fantasy of God, or to the mythical 'them' to sort out the world's problems, but look to our own attitudes and relationships." ¹ Jesus showed us a different way, with the core message 'love one another as I have loved you'. – We may feel too small to think we make a huge difference, and yet, the way we are in the world; the way we treat each other and the contributions we make matter hugely.

And so, being alert and awake means to look at the world, - and perhaps also ourselves - which compassionate and loving eyes; seeing both the good, the beauty, as well as the ugly, the suffering, the painful.

At a time like this, when we are witnessing the tragic events in Israel and Gaza, Ukraine and elsewhere, it means, not looking away from the suffering we are witnessing, but making space to pray – perhaps sit silently with God grieving and lamenting – open hands – recognising our helplessness, our fear, our despair. This enables God to be with us and shape us. Being awake and ready at a time like this means paying attention to how we can make an active difference, through faithful prayer and also action. – For example, we can respond generously to the appeals for help, here in the Great St Mary's Christmas Appeals; or going on the Christian Aid website to support their partners in Palestine, our generosity and sacrifice for our suffering brothers and sisters will make a difference.

Being awake and alert at a time like this may mean paying attention to the voices and initiatives that encourage dialogue and ways to find the common ground. For example, the Woolf Institute here in Cambridge offered a session with members of different faith communities on 'how to keep talking'. Support this and similar initiatives.

Advent is an invitation to recognise that in a the world where there is much 'mess', and we, too, may feel we are a bit of a mess' – God calls to us, saying: I am with you; I do not abandon you, but you need to allow me to be part of your life, make space to love me and my people. Advent is a time for watching, praying, waiting - with open hearts and hands, to allow the potter to shape us – and to trust in the coming of God. Amen.

¹ With thanks to Br Stuart, Mucknell Abbey, Friends of Mucknell Abbey Newsletter No.73, Advent 2023