

ADVENT 1 HOPE - Isaiah 2:1-5

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. For many folk, this means “Oh no! Only 4 weeks till Christmas.” Well that is certainly true – but Advent in the church calendar has a deeper meaning – a meaning we reflect on every year.

Advent is a time for new beginnings, and for setting new goals. It’s a time for examining our lives as disciples of Jesus and making whatever changes are necessary to come closer to Jesus.

Often our Advent reflections concern our personal walk with God. But today I’d like us to think in terms of us as a church, and how we might examine our lives as a Christian community – as a body of believers.

I’d like to look at the Isaiah reading in particular this morning, and see what God might be saying to us as a church.

Listen again to part of the reading from Isaiah 2:

Now it will come about that in the last days the mountain of the house of the LORD Will be established as the chief of the mountains, And will be raised above the hills; And all the nations will stream to it.

The context of this prophecy is that as Isaiah looks around him, he sees people everywhere turning their backs on God. He sees political unrest, hostile attitudes and violence. He sees people in misery, who are burdened with the worries of life, and wrestling with insecurity. Not unlike the current social climate, is it? But then God breaks into these perceptions with a vision of hope for the future.

t of my ministry in regional and rural areas. Ministry in regional areas is challenging. That’s because generally speaking, congregations are both smaller and older. Even if a regional church is blessed with a youth group, there is still a constant exodus to the cities once they finish school, as the young people move away to study or find work.

Regional churches, far more than urban churches, experience the ‘gap’ in their membership of people between 20 and 50 years of age. How many people do we have between 20-50? In fact, how many do we have under 50 period? or under 60, for that matter?

So those of us who make up this particular regional church are doing an amazing job not only missionally, but also keeping up with maintenance, AND with new projects. I’m really thrilled with the work on the Toy library Playground. I’m really thrilled with the beautiful gardens & new Labyrinth at all saints - both projects involving physical hard work! So we’re doing well.

But it's an effort, isn't it? Sometimes - if you're anything like me - you look around at times and think, 'Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had a few younger people in our church?' It would be great to have some younger people who could take on Scripture, or a kids club or a youth group; who could perhaps help with maintenance & upkeep of our buildings, or who could bring fresh energy and enthusiasm to ministry. (Having said that, we are making some great connections with our young families ministry - but it's a long-term ministry)

We are like a small group of frogs in a very large pond, many of whom are tired because we have been swimming in it for a very long time. And sometimes it seems we don't have much of an impact on the culture around us for the Gospel. There are very few new frogs who join the community – other than from neighbouring ponds!

So I found this reading really relevant for us. Because here Isaiah is full of hope! He talks about a time to come when **“the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains; all the nations shall stream to it.”**

The Christian church is the Jerusalem, or Zion, of Isaiah's visions. The church, ultimately, is to be established on the highest mountain – that is, raised above all human civilizations. And Isaiah sees a time ahead when **“the nations shall stream to it.”**

In his vision, Isaiah sees beyond the immediate depressing troubles around him, to a time when God's purpose is established, and he is sovereign over all the nations.

So when I think about that, I'm encouraged, because it reminds me that we too can look beyond our immediate struggles as a church, beyond our griefs and our disappointments to a time when the Spirit of God will bring in his Kingdom in power.

So where does Advent fit into this vision?

Remember I said that Advent is a time for new beginnings, for setting new goals and drawing closer to Christ

In the light of Isaiah's vision we could respond in two different ways.

1. As a small number of rather tired frogs in a very large pond, we could opt to hop on to a lily pad and wait it out. In other words, we could take the easy route. We just maintain what we've got, and pray that somewhere along the way God will do something miraculous and bring new people into the church.
2. Or...we could keep swimming, in God's strength, responding to the commission that Jesus has given us as a church, which is to take the message of the Gospel to others. “Go into all the world making disciples of all nations” is what Jesus said to his disciples.

In the Romans reading for today, we read this: (CEV version) **“It is time to wake up. You know that the day when we will be saved is nearer now than when we first put our faith in the Lord. Night is almost over, and day will soon appear.”**

In other words, Paul is saying that we’re running out of time! God chooses to do his work in this world through his people – through us- and we’re running out of time.

Then in the Gospel reading for today, we read: **“Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on which day the Lord is coming.”**

Once again, there is that sense of urgency. It won’t be good enough, when Jesus finally returns and asks us what we’ve done with his commission, to say, “If I knew you were coming so soon, I’d have been more enthusiastic” Reminds me of that 50’s song – “If I knew you were coming I’d have baked a cake”...

Jesus says, **“...you must be ready, for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”**

So, just say we decide to go with the second response to Isaiah’s vision: which is to take Jesus’ commission seriously and make ourselves available however we can, to help his vision to be realised through us. What could we do? What goals might we set for ourselves as a church during this advent period that would be pleasing to God?

One of the many positive things I see in this parish is the involvement so many folk have in serving the wider community. There are members of our congregation involved in Vinnies & Monties. Others are members of community groups such as Lyons, Rotary, & Marine Rescue. Others are involved in pastoral care. There are people who help in our nursing homes, and others who help teaching Scripture, and working with our young families on a Friday morning.

So, many of us in this Parish are already connecting with the wider community.

- One thing we could do to build on this, is to ask God to use us in those contexts to share him with the people we’re spending time with. Let it be known that we are Christians. I’m sure we do that. But then we could also specifically ask God to give us an opportunity to speak to someone about him - and then watch for it. It will be there!
- Another thing we could do is invite someone to church. Our ‘Invite a Friend’ combined service last week was great, wasn’t it? So many folk have commented on what a great feel there was in the service. With Christmas coming up, it would be a perfectly natural thing to ask someone if they’d like to come to church with us to one of the Carol services or on Christmas morning. It’s such a special time, no-one would be offended.

- Another thing we could do, if we feel we need encouragement in this, is to make a decision to learn more about our faith. Join a Bible Study group in 2017. Perhaps start by coming to a Lenten group in February
- And something that is really helpful if we're looking at being available to God to grow his kingdom – is to strengthen the fellowship in our own church. A church that brings people back is a church that is loving and warm and welcoming. These qualities come about when people in a church spend time with each other and learn to love each other first. Remember Jesus words, “by this shall all men know that you are my disciples: that you love one another!” Decide to stay for morning tea after church! Invite someone to your house for a cuppa. *Do things* with other members of the church on days other than Sundays. If you're someone who does that already, invite someone else! Is there someone in either of our congregations that you don't know very well? You're family - do something about it. Get to know each other better *personally*. As you get to know each other more, love will grow.
- And very importantly, during these warmer months as we have lots of visitors - we can focus on 'being welcoming'. Is someone sitting in your pew? Don't worry about it. They're not going to be there forever. Welcome them. Is someone new standing on their own looking uncomfortable? Go over and chat with them. Then when you need to move away, introduce them to someone else. Perhaps think about inviting them for a coffee during the week, or to go with you to a group you belong to - Woodies? The Camera Club? A Bible Study? The Movie group? So many opportunities to be hospitable! If a visitor feels welcome, and is invited to something during the week, there is every likelihood that they will come back.

So – there are some Advent challenges for our church. Can I encourage all of us to make this a topic of personal prayer over the next four weeks. Let's ask, “Lord, How can our church serve you better? What can I do to be part of that? How can we be more ready for you when you return?”

Let's pray.