

ADVENT 2 Isaiah 11:1- 10; Matthew 3:1-12

UTOPIA. Most of us will be familiar with the word. It basically means an imagined place or state of things in which everything is perfect.

The term was coined from a book written by Thomas More, which was published in 1516. It is a work of satire, which indirectly criticises the political corruption and religious hypocrisy of the day in Europe. More presents his own idea of what an ideal society would look like by describing life on a fictional island called Utopia.

The place described certainly wouldn't be our idea of the ideal society (unless you're keen on having a couple of slaves) - but it was More's.

Over the centuries, this little book has been quite influential, in that it has inspired many abortive attempts to create an ideal society.

If asked, I imagine all of us would have ideas about what a perfect society might look like

John Lennon, of Beatles fame, wrote a song called "Imagine"
Again - not something we'd necessarily agree with, but it was Lennon's idea of the perfect world.

So - we come at the Isaiah reading this morning, which may also seem like something like Utopia - where Isaiah describes a perfect king and a perfect place.

"The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins." (Is 11:1-5)

Oh that we might have a leader in this nation - or anywhere in this physical world - with such attributes!

During the week, a two frame cartoon has been doing the rounds on social media. The first frame has a picture of Donald Trump in full throttle, with a bystander declaring passionately "God has sent us Donald Trump!" (or you could insert here the name of any political leader you can't stand) The second frame has another person saying to the first person, "What? Did God run out of locusts?" it seems it doesn't matter who is in power, they never get it completely right, and they're always going to upset someone!

Isaiah describes a perfect, godly leader. We know this passage to be a Christophony - it is a glimpse of the Christ to come.

We also get a glimpse of a perfect world.

“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.....
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”
Is 11:6-9

The passage is describing a place of peace and harmony, a place where there is no danger and no violence; and a place where God is fully known.

Are these passages describing heaven? A true Utopia we can look forward to when we die? The slaves in the America certainly looked at this passage, and other similar passages, in this way. It's what kept them going in the depths of their suffering.

But is that what this passage is all about - a picture of the perfect king - the coming Christ - and a perfect world that we can look forward to when we die?

Yes, and no.

YES

Yes, the passage is about heaven, about the fulfilment of all God's promises, about the what the Kingdom of God will ultimately look like, once Christ has returned and judged the earth, and all has been put right. It's about the picture we read of in Revelation, 21:4, where 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.

Yes, it is about heaven.

NO

But no - it's also **not** about heaven.

When we talk about the Kingdom of God, it is something that is both NOW, **as well as** NOT YET.

The NOT YET part, we get. We look forward to Christ's return. We look forward to the end of suffering and pain. We look forward to the lion lying down with the lamb - and all of that.

It's the NOW we don't get so well. NOW is God's Kingdom on earth. A kingdom that is flawed and broken, but also a Kingdom that has been redeemed through Christ; and a Kingdom that is moving ever closer to it's fulfilment at Christ's return.

This NOW, is often an uncomfortable, frustrating, wearying, place to be, as we strive with our humanity, in the power of the Spirit, to become everything that God wants us to be.

Back in the Old Testament, the Jews were given the Law. The law showed the ideal, the Utopia, all that was God's perfect plan for them. Of course they weren't able to keep the law.

Why give it to them then, you may ask? Why demand impossible standards of a fallen humanity?

Paul tells us in Romans 7 that the purpose of the law was to reveal our inability to keep it. He says, "I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness."

We know what that's like, don't we? Once we're told not to do something, particularly as a child, we can experience a very strong temptation to do it.

I was 12 or so when my parents decided to give me an 'allowance.' It was all of 50c a week. "Don't spend it all at once," they said, "you can put some in your piggy bank each week, and get something you really want when you have enough."

I was over the moon! I had my own money. I went down to the corner shop - and I saw a kite in the window. So I bought it. I got change. Wow, I thought. So I bought a comic. And I STILL had some left. So I spent the rest on lollies. (50c went a long way back then!) I went home with my treasures and was chided for spending my allowance all at once.

God gave Israel the law to show them they needed him. Then he gave them - and us - Jesus, who completely kept the law, and fills us with his own perfection.

The NOW part of the kingdom in which we live, is a time where in the strength of the Spirit, we continue to pursue holiness, and exemplify God's love. Our mandate as God's people, is to bring his Kingdom to bear on the here and now, both in our own lives, and in the world in which we live. We are called to make a difference in this world. Salt and light!

So if we go back to the Isaiah passage, we need to read it, not just as a picture of what is to come, but a picture of what God wants of his people and of his world, in the here and now.

So - as this passage describes a place of peace and harmony, a place where there is no danger and no violence; and a place where God is fully known - we need to take that on board and, in the power of God's Spirit, seek to make that happen, both in our own lives and in the world.

So God's Kingdom - this utopia that Isaiah describes is not only for the future - that time that is NOT YET. It is God's desire, that as far as possible, is for NOW.

Enter John the Baptist in our Gospel reading.

By and large, John's listeners had lost sight of God's passion for his people to reflect his nature in their lives, and in their community. They had their heads in the clouds, waiting for a Messiah who would solve all their problems, absolving them of any responsibility for the world around them.

Johns call? To shake them out of their complacency. If they were to be ready for God's Kingdom to come among them - they would need to get their act together and repent. They would need to amend their lives, turning from what they knew to be unacceptable to God, and to 'bear fruit that is worth of repentance'.

John said to them, " 'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

The challenge for John's hearers, was to stop just thinking about a future utopia - a perfect time that was to come when the Messiah arrived - and instead, change their behaviour so that God's perfect kingdom would begin in them NOW.

This is our challenge also. To recognise that the NOW is just as important as the NOT YET; to come to God in repentance, offering ourselves to serve him fully, in the power of the Spirit he promised, so that we are truly agents of transformation in this world he died to save.

This is the message of Advent.

Shall we pray.