

SERMON – 14/12/25**'Christ is coming, ready or not'**

Isaiah 35:1-10

"Give strength to hands that are tired and to knees that tremble with weakness. Tell everyone who is discouraged, 'Be strong and don't be afraid! God is coming to your rescue, coming to punish your enemies.'" (Isaiah 35:3-4)

Maybe it's a year or two since some of us played Hide and Seek, but I'm sure we all remember the shiver of excitement we felt when we heard the seeker's count come to an end and the cry going up: "Coming, ready or not!" Perhaps it's a similar feeling (or perhaps it's sheer terror) we experience as the realisation dawns that Christmas is coming, whether we are ready or not. There *is* a lot to cram in to the next couple of weeks – but perhaps we need to calm down a bit and get the rush into perspective.

Actually, we're only half way through the Advent season of preparation and waiting – the purist in me would really rather hold off a bit longer before letting the Christmas floodgates burst, but I'm enough of a realist to know that the wider world has already been there for weeks (and in fact I can report that Creme Eggs are now available for Easter). I have already been at three events when Christmas carols have been sung and of course I always enjoy singing Christmas, but for this morning let our thoughts remain in Advent mode, let our hearts be stilled in quiet expectation, and let us prepare ourselves spiritually for the great celebrations that are now almost upon us.

A fortnight ago we reflected on the theme of Hope as Irene explored the character of Barnabas. Last Sunday we turned our thoughts to the theme of Peace – the life-transforming peace of Christ that passes human understanding. The third Sunday of Advent, which marks the mid-point of our waiting, is called Gaudete Sunday, from the Latin word meaning to rejoice, and our theme this morning, not surprisingly is Joy.

There is a two-pronged focus in the prophecy of Isaiah that guides us through Advent. The prophet looks forward to the coming of the Messiah and we look forward at this time of year to celebrating the coming of Jesus in that role through His birth in the astonishing circumstances in which it took place. But the prophecy is not yet completely fulfilled – Isaiah’s vision is of the Kingdom of God which has been *inaugurated* on the earth by Christ but which is not yet completely *realised*. In this Advent season we await and long for the establishment of God’s perfect rule that will take place when Christ returns in glory and we work and pray for elements of that which is 'not yet' to be evident in our world now.

So as we mark this Third Sunday in Advent, I would like to draw your eyes back from the celebration of Christ’s birth and ask you to think about the significance for you and for me of Christ’s promised return. If I could put it this way: “Christ is coming, ready or not.”

Our passage from Isaiah this morning is possibly less well known than other prophecies of the Kingdom, but in speaking of the joy that will come when the people of God are brought back from exile in Babylon the prophet again points his audience resolutely to Christ, his first readers to the hope of the Messiah’s birth and us who live after that event to the joy that Christ’s coming again will release among those who are waiting for Him.

By the images that Isaiah uses, we are reminded that things were not looking good for the people among whom he ministered and maybe we feel the same about our world or our community or our church today. He describes Israel as a desert, a wilderness; he speaks about people with tired hands and knees that give way with fear. He proclaims that God is coming and that when He comes He will inflict punishment, yet he exhorts his listeners to be strong and not to be afraid because when God comes He will rescue them. He shares with them the hope of their release from captivity, a vision of the desert singing and shouting for joy as streams of water begin to flow and dormant plants burst into bloom, as burning sand becomes a lake and dry land bubbles with springs; as marsh grass and reeds grow in the dry place where jackals once scavenged for food. He speaks about the eyes of the

blind being opened, the ears of the deaf being unstopped, the lame leaping and dancing and the tongue of the mute being set free to rejoice. He describes a highway called the Way of Holiness that leads back to Zion, the road home that will be travelled by those whom God will redeem from exile in Babylon and from which all unrighteousness and evil, all danger and sorrow will be banished.

It is abundantly clear how the prophecy has been fulfilled through the coming of Jesus of Nazareth – the evidence is writ large in the Gospels: the blind were given their sight and the deaf their hearing, the lame were given back the use of their legs and the voices of the mute were lifted in praise to God; by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Jesus' disciples once weak at the knees and paralysed with fear were empowered to preach fearlessly and to lead people to faith throughout the known world; during the succeeding centuries, people whose lives have been parched and fruitless have drunk of the water of life and have blossomed, and in Christ hundreds of millions of people have found the Way, the Truth and the Life, the road home.

For us who live in the years of our Lord, there is so much over which to rejoice as we celebrate what Christ's coming into the world at Bethlehem unleashed and what it still means today – Joy to the world, the Lord *is* come – but it is to the future aspect of Isaiah's prophecy that I want to point you this morning. Christ is coming – ready or not.

Perhaps that doesn't seem to be such good news in a world that likes its Messiah on demand once a year, a Messiah safely confined to a manger offering hope rather than challenge. Isaiah says: "God is coming to your rescue." But he also says: "He is coming to punish your enemies." (v.4) As the Jewish authorities discovered when Jesus overturned the tables of the money-changers and chased out those who were buying and selling in the Temple courts, the reality of "God with us" is sometimes a very uncomfortable one. When we stand to confess our faith, we proclaim our belief in Jesus Christ God's only Son, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary; we proclaim that He suffered for us, that He died and was buried for us and that he rose again for us and opened the way into heaven;

but don't let's forget that we also proclaim that Christ will come again from heaven to judge the living and the dead. Writing to the Thessalonians, the apostle Paul says: "You yourselves know very well that the Day of the Lord will come as a thief comes at night." Christ is coming – ready or not.

Isaiah's picture of the Road of Holiness fills us with hope – "No lions will be there; no fierce animals will pass that way. Those whom the Lord has rescued will travel home by that road. They will reach Jerusalem with gladness, singing and shouting for joy. They will be happy for ever, for ever free from sorrow and grief." But perhaps we conveniently fail to hear Isaiah's warning – "No sinner will ever travel that road." And left to our own devices that could be any one of us. Christ is coming – ready or not.

The same message is echoed in the New Testament. We like to dwell on the vision that John saw of the New Jerusalem. "God Himself will be with them and He will be their God. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared." (Rev. 21:3-4) But how often do we read the following terrible warning, that "cowards, traitors, perverts, murderers, the immoral, those who practise magic, those who worship idols, and all liars – the place for them is the lake burning with fire and sulphur, which is the second death." (Rev. 21:8) Christ is coming – ready or not.

But that, my friends, takes us to the very heart of the Christmas Gospel. Without Christ, we are all lost, for which of us can say we are without sin? "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8) By our own merits there is no place for us on the Road of Holiness; by our own poor efforts at goodness there is no entry to the New Jerusalem. Had Christ not come into our world to rescue us we would be unrescued, had we not reached out by faith to take hold of our rescuer, we would be lost – there would be no hope, no peace, no joy – and for many around us, that is the reality of life. In Paul's words, many are 'without hope and without God in the world,' (Eph.2:12) and for many the celebration of Christmas has a form of godliness but denies its power, it is all tinsel and no Gospel.

And this is the joyful message that we have as a Church to share with a world that is walking blindly to disaster, unprepared to meet its Creator. Isaiah held out a challenges and a promise: "Tell everyone who is discouraged, 'Be strong and don't be afraid. 'God is coming to your rescue.'" In the coming of Christ that promise is fulfilled – 'Joy to the world, the Lord is come!' Will we let Christmas come and go without helping those around us to see the true significance of what it is we celebrate? And will we forget to mention that one day the Christ who came in weakness, who was laid in a manger and who died on a cross, will come again in power and glory to judge the living and the dead? Christ is coming – ready or not.

In some ways that is a terrifying prospect. All that we know and find security in here on earth will be shaken. Whether Christ comes again in our lifetime or whether it will be after our time, no-one knows, but what we *do* know is that one day we will all stand before Him to give an account of ourselves. For those who have only themselves to trust in there is good reason to feel feeble and weak at the knees – I know if I had to stand alone before the Creator and Judge of all the earth I would have little or nothing to commend myself, but in Christ I know that I will not be alone there – at God's right hand stands the One who is my Saviour. For all who are in Christ the prospect is truly wonderful: as Jesus Himself said: "Stand up and raise your heads, because your salvation is near." (Luke 21:28) The desert and parched land of this life will be overtaken by life eternal where the water of life gushes and bubbles; we will be set free from the blindness and deafness, the inability to walk and talk that we all struggle with to one degree or another and we will see God face to face, home at last!

Are you on the Highway, the Road of Holiness? You may not feel worthy, you may often stumble and fall into sin, but are you on the way? Are you in Christ this Christmas? Then as Isaiah promises, you *will* reach the New Jerusalem with gladness, singing and shouting for joy.