

Advent 1
2/12/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 2:1-5
Psalm 122
Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44

Catching the sound of a far off song

Early in the mornings someone on Queensberry St has a radio that starts up. As a program begins the sound of music breaks into the morning and disturbs our sleep. Do we wake up and listen, or do we continue as we were?

In a similar way the message of Advent comes to disrupt our settled way of life. The reading from Isaiah is an anthem born amongst the deeper chords of a far off tune that sings of a world renewed.

For the prophet Isaiah Jerusalem was a vexatious problem – a locus for national pride, self-sufficiency and self-serving religion. Yet here Isaiah looks beyond all the ways in which Jerusalem has been a disappointment. He imagines the city as the central figure in a majestic vision.

For Jerusalem read not the city or a place but a community in which God's promises will be fulfilled - a mentor for all people. Jerusalem is raised up like this is not because of its political value or power, or its military capability. It is the place of God's Presence, which demonstrates what life shaped according to God's ways looks like. Jerusalem is a place of justice, peace and well being for all. And Jerusalem gains a reputation and becomes a destination for others because of its receptivity to God's teaching. There is great joy amongst those who come, and their engagement in God's ways makes war irrelevant. Isaiah's poem opens a window through which we glimpse an alternative society in which there is a change of intentions and a change in procedures as well. The unimaginable happens: weapons of destruction are deliberately turned into tools for an economy oriented to nurturing and sustaining life.

There is a sharp contrast between this vision for the future and the present failures of the community of faith. But what Isaiah sees and speaks of is a gift to him from the future into which God is drawing us. Despite the disappointments God has not dismissed the human community or our efforts for good. God and mortals are together in this vision and there is a deliberate effort to translate negatives into positives, based on the promises of God.

What makes it hard is that we know about promises. We pray for the kingdom to come and regularly reflect on the hope for a new order. In the last couple of months especially there have been so many promises we wondered what the challengers would do if they gained power. Now the defeated party declares there is no need to stick by anything promised prior to the Election, while the new government stridently presses it right to implement a new vision for Australia.

Life as we know it includes promises that change or evaporate, and visions that die as often as they come to fruition. In personal and public life, people don't expect to keep promises; what we look for from each other, and our leaders, does not reach very far. Why would we hope for anything new from God?

Our hearts know we need of hopes and dreams and visions. The state of the environment needs visionary care, we dream of a world free of wars and rumors of wars. We yearn for better relationships between nations and races, especially with our Indigenous peoples. And as the proportion of substance affected and socially disadvantaged people on our streets intensifies we long for the power to construct a more equitable society in which those needing care receive it, and a greater level of well-being develops for all.

Advent is an invitation to listen again to that faint song that comes on the morning air, and to trust its message anew. It is an invitation to wake up to the reliability of the one who promises a new life for all, to cast off the distractions, and stand against the scoffers, the quarrelsome, the debauched, and all who would seek to lead us in another direction.

Noah is a mentor for Advent people. He was willing to do something, which seemed totally unreasonable. He stepped away from the concerns of those about him, and no doubt earned their scorn. But he did it because above the white noise of the current discourse he heard something different and decided to stick with that. The meaning behind what he did was a new start for the world, in all the ways we might dream about. And what happened did not come from Noah, but it did not happen without him.

At Advent we renew our awareness of the song God sings to us of a promised new future, and its call to a new ethical responsibility in the world. We cannot domesticate this to suit ourselves. We are called to live by what we have heard, and what we do will reflect what is promised.

A British charity group looked at Mozambique following a time of conflict, and offered tools in place of surrendered weapons. They received so many guns at first they did not know what to do with them. Then they hit on a solution. They cut the weapons into pieces and gave them to local artists as materials for their work. An ensuing exhibition in London was a sensation. One sculpture of a Peace Bird caused a critic to say: [this] "is no gentle dove with an olive branch in its mouth. It is a feisty, feral creature which needs to be grasped and, perhaps, tamed." As Jim Wallis of the Sojourner's community used to say: if we want to have peace we must be prepared to wage peace as strongly as we are prepared to wage war.

Christians and Jews, and perhaps Muslims, hope for a world that is based on everything we have been talking about, a world that has been healed, blessed and cared for. We have been hoping for a very long and some grow tired and pessimistic in the waiting. But speculating about the time is a distraction.

In Advent we are called to wake up and catch the strains of a far off song. It is a melody based on the song of God's promises, a distant tune that will, one day, build up into a mighty Fugue. When that day and hour will be is not ours to know. Faith

counts on the reliability of what we have heard, and lives knowing the difference between what is and what will be. What we can be sure of is that we are called to stay alert because God's majestic promises will be on the move in the world, for us and for all people, and this will be for our good.