

Revd Rebecca Newland
28 November 2010
Advent 1A

Isaiah 2.2-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13.9-14, Matthew 24.36 – 44

It has been almost a year since I started as rector at St Philip's – 363 days to be precise. It has been a great 12 months. Thank you all so much! As I start my next year here, as we all move into the new church year we are preparing for the coming of our Lord at Christmas. Advent is also about preparing for the second coming of Christ about which we do not know the time or place as Jesus warns. We are simply asked to be ready. As the Bishop reminded us at the induction of the new rector of West Goulburn yesterday afternoon, live lives that you can be completely confident you can offer to your God at any time. So with this New Year and this call to be ready I want to pick up the last verse of our Isaiah reading as our theme today. It is, "*O house of Jacob come, let us walk in the light of the Lord*".

I think Advent should begin in complete darkness and then gradually become more light filled until we reach the glory and splendour of midnight mass on Christmas Eve. If I could turn all the lights off or down at this point I would to give us a sense of this awakening. As we move into the New Year I believe we are gradually being awakened to new possibilities.

But first some background and an update: These first 12 months of being the priest and leader of this parish have been for me a time of consolidation and discovery. When I started I said to the parish council that I wanted to have a year that was about stock – taking and taking it a little easy in terms of new ideas and projects. Rushing things in your first year in a new position is only wise if there is an emergency on hand and St Philip's is not in that place. Although parish council and I decided to go slow we have not been idle. In fact heaven help us if we had decided to be busy. As the oversight body of this church we and all of you have achieved a great deal in terms of facilities and maintenance. The long-standing issue of the hall drains has been, we fervently hope, solved. There is a beautiful new parquet floor in the sanctuary. We have disabled ramps at the front and back entrances of the church and new concrete paving. We have an almost 4 kilowatt system of Solar Panels on the hall roof. Funding for the outreach at the Northbourne Community Centre has been stable and Rev'd Robin's work is gaining more and more attention and support throughout the diocese. Pandora's has continued to function beautifully and has contributed substantially to all this work. Food at St Philip's has provided funds and fantastic food and fellowship. We have had another wonderfully successful twilight fair and the grounds are looking spectacular. There is a new storage cupboard in the foyer and my name has finally gone up on the board (I know, I still have to get a picture!). We also implemented a new once a month evening service to cater for those people and families who found it difficult to get to church on a Sunday morning. Please forgive me if I have forgotten anything in this list.

As well as these things parish council established a planning group 6 months ago to consider ways in which we could grow the parish. As you know we decided on a thorough and considered process called 'Church Unique' developed by Will Mancini, an American church consultant. This approach was suggested to me by the Rev'd Dr. Brett Morgan, rector of St Georges Pearce where they have recently used the same process. I have been very keen to put the time in now to get our future direction and plans right for the future. What we put in place will have consequences for years to come so it is vital to do the hard slog at the beginning.

The group that has been working it's way through the process is comprised of Ian Cousins, Ben Dyer, Sarah Gowty, John Girdlestson, Leighton Mann, Ann Munroe, Brian McKinlay,

Helen Palethorpe and myself. We have also been assisted by Brett. We have sat and talked. We have researched and asked questions of other people. We have argued and debated, disagreed and come to consensus. We have had suggestions and input from people about what we could do and it is all in the mix as we continue our planning. I thank them for their interest and wisdom. I am happy to report we have finished the first part of the process, which was to discover what it is we do in this place extraordinarily well, our Kingdom Concept. This is not the vision statement. It is not a mission statement. It is our unique background story to all we do. If you think in terms of a computer we have named the operating system that just keeps humming away in the background. It is what we think we do well and what we aspire to do better. So at St Philip's the planning group believes *we glorify God and make disciples by creating a place where we live the love of Christ*. Christ's love is never an abstract idea here. In so many ways we are a place of welcome and hospitality where love is shown in many acts of practical loving service. It is shown at Pandora's, at Northbourne, at Calvary, through our hospitality, through our beautiful music that enriches so many lives and many other ministries.

We have thought this through carefully so if you have any questions or comments we would love to hear them. This small sentence, *we glorify God and make disciples by creating a place where we live the love of Christ* may not seem much but it is foundational for the steps that follow. It helps us honour the past as well as give us clarity about who we actually are.

The next part of the process is to identify four things: 1) Where God is taking us now – that is what will be our current focus and mission; 2) The values that underpin our actions and decisions; 3) The strategies that we will put in place and 4) How we will measure it. This is an intriguing and exciting process. I hope you can see that this will truly lay down a multi-year program and plan for how we can move forward. I believe this will give us a solid foundation for all our decisions over the next 5 to 10 years and will focus our energies productively. By next years AGM in early March we plan to have this part of the process ready.

I truly believe that God has wonderful things in store for St Philip's. In front of us is challenge and new beginnings. Hence why I believe the verse from Isaiah speaks to us today, "*O house of Jacob come, let us walk in the light of the Lord*". I with Isaiah want to encourage and urge us all to walk confidently in the light and trust in God's power and presence. For the Lord we follow is a God of light.

Yet it is important to be reminded from our readings that darkness is a reality and a possibility for we humans. In human culture darkness has more often than not been a symbol of evil or mystery. It is a symbol of the not-good. Scientifically of course there is no such thing as darkness. Physically it is only possible to have a reduced amount of light. So darkness is simply the absence of light. There have been so many dark times in human history and in our own lives we experience darkness in many forms. The church has a whole has had dark times and each individual church will have had it's moments and times of darkness.

In the Isaiah reading the darkness is the darkness of war and conflict. To get a sense of the darkness of war we really need to turn to poetry, art or images. When I was young I came across the poetry of Wilfred Owen the World War I soldier who was killed in September 1918. He wrote a number of war poems. Here is a few stanzas from his poem 'Exposure' written on the Western Front.

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us . . .

Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent
Low drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient . . .
Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,
But nothing happens.

Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire.
Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.
Northward incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,
Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.
What are we doing here?

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow . . .
We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.

This is one poem from one war but the bleakness, the despair and the confusion it portrays could be true of any conflict at any time.

For Isaiah, standing above this dark reality of war is the mountain of the Lord's house, the glorious throne of God. Isaiah says, "Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord". In the light of the Lord the implements of war are turned into instruments of peace and prosperity. In the Old Testament a person walked in the light of God by following his laws and commands. The message is we walk in the light if we follow his ways. As Christians we believe that love is the fulfilling of the Law and that Jesus Christ embodies and delivers this love. In just one true act of love then all God's purposes are fulfilled and we are in the light and peace becomes real.

In our readings from Romans the darkness is our individual sinfulness. Paul has these words for the darkness – drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarrelling and jealousy. I am sure we could all add many more. It sounds puritanical doesn't it? It's as if Paul is a great killjoy but there is little joy in out of control behaviour. Trust me I've been there. It might be fun for a few hours but there are always consequences, some of them very dark. Paul was greatly concerned for each local Church and these dark things could pull apart a community in deeply wounding ways. Paul says to his readers – put on the armour of light, put on the Lord Jesus Christ. For Paul to walk in the light we turn to Christ and make him our Lord, we immerse our selves in him.

In the Gospel reading the inference is that we live in darkness and there is a very human tendency to be asleep, unconscious of threat, possibility and the presence of God. The darkness in the Gospel reading is the darkness of ignorance and confusion. As we look for the coming of Christ, into our hearts, into our world, apparently we can get sidetracked and fall asleep. We can simply be not paying attention. Instead we need to become conscious - conscious of ourselves, conscious of our limitations and conscious of the possibilities of God. For Jesus we are walking in light when we begin to wake up.

So at the beginning of this New Year I encourage us all to walk in the light of the Lord. Let us continue to follow the law of love, to live the love of Christ in all we do. Let us turn to him again and again in all our joys, sorrows and doubts and cloth ourselves with his way. And let us wake up. Wake up to new possibilities, new directions, new expressions of love in our lives. I ask you to keep me awake and I ask you to continue to pray for our planning and the planning group that we will discover anew where God is leading us in his wonderful light.
Amen