

The Unexpected Coming

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Second Sunday of Advent, Year A — 4 December 2022

Isaiah 11.1-10; Psalm 72.1-7, 18-21; Romans 15.4-13; Matthew 3.1-12.

Perhaps, like me, you have been reading about the debate surrounding the Indigenous Voice to Parliament. Some of those opposing the voice, it has to be said, are arguing from a perspective of common sense. They are warning us of enshrining a voice based on racial grounds. They are looking for more information. For many of us, their concerns are well grounded. However, over the last couple of weeks, I have attended events in which prominent members of the Aboriginal community have spoken. The first was the Grace Groom Oration for Mental Health Australia and the second was the National Prayer Breakfast at Parliament House. The two speakers were very different, from different parts of the country and different groups and with different agendas. The first was the lawyer and academic Noel Pearson from the Cape York and the second was Peter Gibbs from western NSW, who is the founder of an organisation which advocates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recruits in the NSW Police Force. They were both passionate, compelling speakers; both visionary in their outlook, both unwilling to be stymied by bureaucracy or politics, both unmoved by the voices urging caution.

A similar outlook is evident today in the readings set down for the day; it is the overarching theme of the Advent season. Today we are presented with three visionaries: Isaiah, Paul, and John the Baptist, three folk unwilling to allow religion, ethnicity, exile, or sectarianism, let alone caution, to blur their vision. The focus of that vision for them, and for us today, is unity in Christ.

Today John the Baptist looms large on the horizon. We hear John's call to repentance and his reminder that God's kingdom is near. With this prophecy, John takes his place at the end of a long line of prophets announcing the coming of the messiah. A line in which the prophet Isaiah is perhaps the most prominent. This movement ends with the birth of Jesus, whose coming was foretold and whose coming we still prepare for today. But was it the coming that was expected? I think the answer is no; it was not the expected messiah. John would later ask 'are you the one.' The coming of Jesus remains for us something which requires repentance in its fullest, a change of heart and mind.

John's call for repentance is a call of preparation, for what? His baptism of repentance was not the final word. As he reminds us 'one who is more powerful than I will bestow upon you a baptism of Spirit and fire'. This is what we prepare for. John's stinging rebuke is aimed at those who seem unwilling to countenance a new way of thinking, a new way of seeing, a change of heart. His is a call to prepare for something radically new, like Isaiah's vision:

*Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the young lion shall browse together,
with a little child to guide them.
The cow and the bear shall be neighbours,
together their young shall rest;
the lion shall eat hay like the ox.
The baby shall play by the cobra's den,
and the child lay his hand on the adder's lair.*

When we listen to this vision, we are tempted to disregard it as naïve at best, dangerous at worst. But to think in this way is diminish the power of prophetic vision. It is the blindness that, so often in the gospels, Jesus cures.

Our image from Isaiah gives us some insight as we consider what repentance looks like as a lived reality. The calf and the lion, the cow, and the bear, are living in harmony. The lion and the ox eat together. It seems unthinkable, really. The prophets give us the imagination, the vision, for what is possible when convention, logic, caution, or sometimes even good common sense tell us otherwise. They point the way to Jesus and prepare God's people for the Kingdom that is at hand and still not fully realized.

So, we hear John the Baptist call us to repentance and hold onto this image from Isaiah. What are these prophets telling us about God's Kingdom? Perhaps to encounter others with whom we may not typically engage. Perhaps to live in harmony with all God's creatures, to share a meal with those we might consider an adversary. To commit to working toward peace and justice, seeking right relationships, even if it *seems* our actions will have little impact. To look beyond the religious, political, ideological divisions that so often mar our discourse, that stymie the rule of God. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you. Paul's vision is for the unity of the Jews and Gentiles in Christ. This unity is our ongoing project in this country and indeed in many others' places, including the ancient lands of the Jewish people.

Advent is dominated by apocalyptic readings and thought. I sense in some a certain weariness with it all, the extraordinary visions and dreams, the animals which seem to be the result of some interesting interbreeding! I hear you . . . what can it all mean, and what does it matter anyway! Let's think anew!

First and foremost, do not think of the apocalypse as some end of world scenario, don't be swept along with the 'apocalyptic' movies depicting a post nuclear winter and all that! There is in this genre of writing a clash . . . yes certainly. It is all about the inevitable clash that occurs when peoples of differing races, creeds, and worldviews come together. But importantly it is about a new vision of how they are grafted together, how they become one, how they are reconciled, how they become a sign of the new age. The end of the Book of Revelation is not about the end of the world but of the renewal of this one, the new age, a sign of the rule of God coming among us.

This is not stuff that just happened two thousand years ago or more, we today should be looking for those signs of God's rule. Yes, sometimes it's uncomfortable. It shakes us out of certainties and complacency. We are preparing for the coming of Christ, the new age is born among us and we are called to nurture that new life to make it a reality today. It isn't always easy. We can read our scriptures this morning with the Indigenous Voice in our minds. What might this vision of reconciliation look like for us? Think of Isaiah, Paul and John the Baptist, radicals, idealists . . . some would say crazy! Mmm, perhaps, but until we begin to renew our vision things will not change and we will fail to see the rule of God coming among us. When we are exercising, the Army Physical Training Instructors tell us to become comfortable with discomfort. They want to change my body despite my protests. Tough! Advent PT!! Amen.