

ADVENT SUNDAY

Nicky Ing - 1st December 2002

Isaiah 63: 16-64:8, Psalm 80:1-7, 1Corinthians 1: 3-9, Mark 13: 32-37.

Today, our seasonal Church calendar starts the journey towards Christmas.. a feast which although it arrives only on December 25th, the shops have been reminding us about since the beginning of August! Living, as we do in the southern hemisphere, of course this is a time when many people go away on holiday... the beaches are full, there is heavy traffic on the roads, Matric and University exams are over, factories and businesses are closing down soon.... Holidays are starting, there are Christmas trees and decorations up in the shops and there are Christmas parties happening everywhere! It can, however, be an exhausting time of year, when people are pressured to spend money they don't have, in order to buy presents that other people may not need.... And children can make very powerful demands on their parents, with expectations of what they think they need!!..... We may well find ourselves being encouraged to eat and drink more than is good for us, and if we turn on our TV or radio, we can feel bombarded by persuasive and noisy advertising which jars our nerves quite a lot! Everybody seems to be in a rush... there is a sense that we **can't wait**; there is no time to be silent and prepare, no time to meditate or contemplate the reality of the Christmas message.... But what is Advent **meant to be**?????...For Christian people, it is meant to be four weeks of expectant longing for Christ.... **Waiting** for Christ.... of seeking God. Our waiting and preparation does not mean rushing about buying presents, but in slowing down, and **listening to God.**

Our first reading today, from Isaiah, finds the Israelites in exile, in a plight of their own making. It tells God: 'You are our Father, and Our Redeemer' from of old.... But 'we have wandered from your paths'..(did you notice the verse actually says 'Why O lord, do you make us stray from your ways and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you?' The writer even manages to make it sound as if their problems are all **God's** fault!!!!) In this situation, the Israelites long for God...who seems to be **ABSENT**..... they acknowledge their deep need of God, and the fact that in their human frailty they have turned away from God... such rich and descriptive language...(in v 6... '**we all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away**'..... but finally comes the admission.. '**Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand**' what a beautiful image, often used in Scripture, of God our **creator**, who makes us in his own image, and who longs to **mould us, and shape** us.. who wants to hold us in the palm of his hand, lest we fall and break... and then the Psalm we read together just now continues to call upon God...the God who seems to be absent: '**Restore us O God, let your face shine, that we may be saved.**'

The second reading also invites the reader to concentrate on God. It comes from the beginning of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians...but if we were to read on, we should find that the **last** thing the Corinthians have been interested in is concentrating on God!! They have been taken up with themselves and inevitably ended up in disagreements, jealousy and squabbling. Paul reminds them and us too, of course, that we need to put our attention where it belongs. He starts with the simple word **GRACE**... 'Grace to you and **peace** from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ'a reminder that everything we have and are comes from God alone as a free gift... So... it is not their doing... or ours... this gift of Grace is all **God's** doing. There is no congratulation offered to them for being spiritual people... no! not at all! Paul reminds them that they have been enriched only because of what Christ has done... and that Christ **will** strengthen them to the end, in order that they may be blameless when He returns. Paul emphasises, in v. 9...that it is **God** who is faithful.. it is God who has done it all.

The Gospel finds Jesus speaking, to the disciples, warning them that there will be difficult times ahead. It will be tough going. And his message to them is to '**KEEP ALERT, be awake!**' So, just when it seems that it is holiday time, and we can relax and enjoy ourselves, we have Jesus warning us, no less than **three times** in this short passage:

'**Look out! Wake Up!**' and we find ourselves being told that we don't know the time!!! The big danger that Jesus is warning us about is that we may think we can run the whole show, but we can't. We are servants, entrusted with a responsibility to look after what God has given us. Jesus then tells one of his mini parables, about someone who goes away on a journey, leaving his slaves in charge... but **who is** really in charge?... it is God, not us... the doorkeeper is challenged to stay awake, so that he will be ready when the master of the house returns. Now some people might think that the job of a doorkeeper is rather like a bouncer in a nightclub...To guard the entrance..even to lean hard against the door, so as to keep out those who should not be allowed to enter. But in fact everything in our Christian tradition teaches us that as Christian doorkeepers, we are to keep awake and alert, so that nobody will have a chance to walk past the door **without being invited to come in.**

We do not need to be reminded that we live in a violent world, and there is pain and tragedy all around us. The signs of it are everywhere. Today being World AIDS Day, our focus is particularly on the effects that the pandemic is having everywhere, and especially in our own province. And the media will continually bring before us situations where power is abused and people are cruelly treated. I believe there is a continual struggle within each of us, to try and make some kind of meaning of events that happen around us. We constantly want to ask the question '**Why?**' As I look back over this past year, I have been privileged to be alongside many people who have suffered, and who still do suffer, in the face of sorrow. Often

this is because of the loss of a loved one.. sometimes it seems to be **untimely** sorrow. The death of a child...perhaps a daughter..or a son.. a husband.... A wife... sometimes illness, or accidental death, strikes unexpectedly...and there is pain, and questioning, and we struggle with our own bodily frailty. There has been the sorrow of watching exiled farmers and their families leaving Zimbabwe.....sometimes they have been families of people here in this congregation. The urban terrorism that seems to be escalating world wide, and which seems to be striking out more in Africa, makes us feel **fearful**..... The pain of parents is excruciating when their adult children are suffering. I know it too. We feel broken, vulnerable.....we agonise over broken relationships in families.. or perhaps with those whom we have trusted, and in whom we feel a sense of disappointment.. a business collapsed...There is also the loss of dignity and freedom in old age, for ourselves, and for others, which is often difficult to cope with. When we think about the pain of those who are living with HIV/AIDS, and we want to help and we wonder if our little bit **can** be any help...sometimes we may feel overwhelmed by the many needs which we are unable to meet, and like the people in those readings we had today, we feel as if we are also experiencing the **ABSENCE** of God.

Recently, Viv Stacey, Moira and Quintin Stubbing's daughter who presently lives in England, came to visit and she spoke to us in the intercessory prayer meeting about her own church there, in a village called Woodham. The Church is called All Saints Church, and it is very old and beautiful. Viv told us that a few months ago they experienced a series of vicious attacks on the Church by unknown vandals, in which all the stained glass windows, which had beautiful pictures of the saints on them were smashed...irreparably... then a war memorial outside the church on which there was a beautiful bronze statue of Christ, was broken down and the statue was stolen...and the old rectory, which was not actually lived in by the priest, was burnt down and an elderly man living there died in the fire. There were these three terrible things that happened, in a short space of time. One can imagine the congregation's sense of violation, and confusion, as to who would **hate** so much that they would want to do such destructive things. And then, a few weeks later, they found that the feet of Christ, from the statue, had been sawn off and left in a tree just outside the Church. The rest of the statue, the body of Christ, was still missing.. All they had left was the feet, with the nail through them, which had held them to the Cross.

Viv told us how the people tried to find **meaning** in all this, and she told us the most amazing story, as to how they dealt with it. As they gathered up the fragments of glass from the shattered windows they decided that they would put one of these mangled leaden frames in the town square, and use it as a symbol of reconciliation. They took the tangled framework of what had once been an object of beauty, and they put a basket of pieces of coloured ribbon next to it. They invited people to reconcile with one another, and as a sign of peace, to tie

pieces of matching ribbon to the framework....as a symbol of the peace made, of forgiveness given and received. Within a few hours the frame became a brightly coloured mass of ribbons...and people testified to the way they had been blessed through it.....God had done a work of **beauty** in the midst of chaos... God had used something ugly and brutal to show forth **love**.... But it had to be done through the body of Christ. The people also began to study the lives of the saints whose names had been engraved on those stained glass windows..and whose images were now **ABSENT** as a result of the vandalism, and now they have come out with a little book of those saints, and the stories of their lives...

And what about the **severed feet** of Christ? Again, the people tried to find **meaning**, and to understand what was the message that God wanted to give them through the destruction of what they had loved and held dear. As they meditated and prayed, they began to ask themselves, 'If the Body of Christ is absent, **where**, or what, or **who**, is the **BODY of CHRIST?**' and who are those who are the feet of Christ today? Can it be us? What is God asking of us? And so they began to **find** a meaning, and to be able to convey that meaning to others.

We were all so touched by this story when Viv told us about it, and I wanted to share it with you today because I believe it has particular meaning for us too, and that there are parallels for us in our own society here in on... Often, like the Israelites in exile whom we empathise with today, we may be tempted to wonder if God is absent.... In this time of Advent, when we are focussing on the first coming of Christ, and also on Christ as he will come again at the end of time, we need to be very aware of the places that Christ is present, and be alert and aware of the ways in which Christ comes to us. Do we take to heart the promises of hope that Jesus holds out to us? Do we have a great longing in our hearts for things that are sacred? We are not promised perfect peace...but we are promised that with Christ we shall never need to be afraid. We are not redeemed from our human condition, but given strength to endure it... we are not given a full understanding of life, but simply the courage to live it. We are not freed from worry, but are offered the possibility of letting tomorrows things belong to tomorrow, because they belong to God... the God who loves us and holds all things in his hand.. **God the potter, who moulds us and refines us.**

Advent is a season of **hope**, a time when we can bring to God those things which are wounded in us, and ask for restoration. It is a good time for us to pause and ask, 'What is there in my life that I need to bring to the feet of Jesus for healing? Has any part of my life gone lame? Has my enthusiasm waned? Has my trust in others been damaged, or broken? Or my energy to do good, depleted? Have I been ignoring things that need tending or nurturing in my spirit? Or is there a relationship that needs to be healed? As we come to the Eucharist

today let us bring all those things before God and ask for a spirit of wakefulness, and a desire to be filled with all that he can offer us.

I have left a prayer focus at the back of the Church, with pictures of the items I have spoken about. It will be up here during this coming week, together with a little booklet of Advent meditations written by Fr. Nick King, which will be here for anyone to use during the weekdays leading up to Christmas..... lets try and spend special time in prayer in these days, to focus on God, and know that we will be blessed in doing it.

(Read Mother Julian of Norwich's prayer, how **she** found **meaning** in things which seemed hard... how God helped her through her life of prayer).

Love was His Meaning

From the time that it was shown I desired often to know what was our Lord's meaning. And fifteen years after and more, I was answered in inward understanding, saying, 'Would you know your Lord's meaning in this? Learn it well. Love was His meaning. Who showed it you? Love. What did He show you? Love. Why did he show you? For love. Hold fast to this, and you shall learn and know more about Love, but you will never need to know or understand about anything else for ever and ever'. Thus did I learn that love was our Lord's meaning. And so I saw full surely that before ever God made us, he loved us. And this love was never quenched nor ever shall be. And in this love he has done all his works, and in this love he has made all things profitable to us, and in this love our life is everlasting. In our making we had beginning, but the love in which he made us was in him from without beginning, in which love we have our beginning. And all this we shall see in God without end; which Jesus grant us. **Amen.**