

## Sermon for the Second Sunday in Advent, 10 December 2023

### The Very Revd Dr Sarah Rowland Jones, Dean of St Davids

*Isaiah 40. 1-11*

*Psalm 85. 8-13*

*2 Peter 3. 8-15a*

*Mark 1. 1-8*

Last Wednesday, 6 December, we celebrated the Feast of St Nicholas with our morning Eucharist at the Chapel to St Nicholas at the north-east corner of the cathedral. It's generally the only day of the year when we use this altar. St Nicholas is depicted in the stained glass window, holding three golden balls, representing his three gifts of gold, given anonymously through a window on consecutive nights to a poor family with three daughters, providing dowries so they would not be sold into slavery and prostitution.

It's not hard to see how in popular culture St Nicholas became St Klaus, Santa Claus, who is never caught in the act of delivering gifts down chimneys! Yet St Nicholas, although some of the stories about his miracle working are definitely later additions, truly was a historic figure, a bishop of the late 3rd, early 4th century, living in Myra, the modern-day city of Demre in Turkey. While Santa Claus with his elves, flying reindeer and toy factory near the North Pole is in quite another category!

Contrasting the two has underlined to me once again the fundamental truth that Christmas is an historic event; and that we need to be wary of sentimental story-telling. The starkness of this is of course brought home this year by the events in the Holy Land. Yet if our God, and the salvation brought and offered by the child in the Manger – who became the man on the cross, risen and ascended, to whose second coming we also look forward in Adventtide – is not bigger than the trauma and tragedy currently unfolding, then he is no God at all.

I have been helped on my Advent journey this year by following the booklet of Daily Readings, Meditations and Prayers produced by the clergy of the the Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem, in the midst of all the current conflict, trauma and agony. You can find it quite easily online, including through the Anglican communions website and Facebook page. (A former Dean of St Davids, Carlyle Witton-Davies, was, incidentally, a Canon Residentiary of Saint George's Cathedral in Jerusalem from 1944 to 1949, and I lived and worshipped in the Diocese, which extends to Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, from 1984 to 1987 when at the British Embassy in Amman. I was back in Jerusalem, which I knew well in those days, last February, and it was only by chance that I was not there again in early October. The Archbishop of Jerusalem, Hosam Naoum, has also been a friend and colleague for the past decade through my international Anglican work.)

In his introduction to the booklet, Archbishop Hosam writes:

Due to the current situation in our beloved Holy Land and the heartbreaking scenes that have shattered our hearts, we have decided this year to limit our celebrations to prayers, liturgies, and carols within our churches. In a spirit of solidarity within the body of Christ, I invite you to join us in this discipline by reflecting on the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ more than 2000 years ago, as well as on the conditions prevailing in the land at that time. In doing so we will find that they were no better than the

circumstances here today. During the first Christmas, the Holy Family had difficulty finding a place for their son's birth. There was the killing of children. There was military occupation. And there was the Holy Family becoming displaced as refugees. Outwardly there was no reason for celebration and joy other than the birth of the Lord Jesus. In our day let us likewise find our cause for celebration from fixing our eyes on the Child lying in the Manger.

This is the context that we bring to our readings this morning, the second Sunday in Advent. So let the focus we bring be to fix our eyes on the coming Christ child. In the Advent Meditations, we move today from the theme of the first week, hope, to peace (with joy and love to follow). Peace seems a tall ask at the moment, so should we park that hope to one side for the time being, as just too difficult? Or should we instead say that our need for peace is absolutely center stage? Other Advent traditions take the prophets as the theme of the second Sunday, and so we have this reading from Isaiah, reflected in the ministry of John the Baptist.

Today has a message of peace, though it is far beyond us to deliver this. But the Psalmist says 'I will listen to what the Lord God will say: for he shall speak peace to his people ... truly his salvation is near to those who fear him ... the Lord will indeed give all that is good.'

Such is human hubris that it can be hard to acknowledge we are incapable of achieving, incapable of delivering, that which we can conceive in our hearts and minds, and can yearn for. It seems so paradoxical that we can imagine, and go on imagining, what is impossible. From World Peace to painting a watercolour: how often do our lofty ideals collapse into disappointing delivery?

Indeed, one might ask whether it is the act of a sadistic deity to create humanity so that our grasp falls short of our reach. But that would be a counsel of despair. Let us rather view this as Saint Augustine did, that God made us restless, until we find our rest in him: planting within us that insistent motivation to seek his answers for our lives. This is the essence of the aching, yearning, human condition into which, in today's readings, God speaks words of comfort, of tenderness and love – though we are no more constant than a flower in a meadow.

But God's message remains: good tidings; do not fear; here is your God! He comes, he is always coming. Wherever our life is as barren as a wilderness; as parched as the desert; in the deepest valley trough; hemmed in by mountainous, unsurpassable, obstacles; when the ground underfoot is uneven, unstable, unsteady, unpredictable, unreliable ... here, God will come, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.

Isaiah foretold it. John the Baptist knew its coming, and called for repentance. Repentance has become so misunderstood these days. Its essential meaning is turning: turning away from the striving and struggling, thinking it is all down to us; that we can do it, do it all, and all by ourselves; and that we're doing just fine without God.

No, we have to repent and turn away from such egocentric nonsense. We must turn and welcome judgment – one of the central themes of Advent – because the judgment of God is not about condemnation, but about rescue. God's judgment tells it as it is; it shows up truthfully how far short we fall; and what is the glorious, righteous, holy, beautiful and perfect outcome which God desires for us; and unlike our own failing efforts, what he promises, what he offers, will come to pass.

Judgement declares the gap between what we are and what Christ can make us. So we must let go of trying to be in control, repent, turn and take his outstretched hand of rescue and let him lead us in the straight paths of the Lord.

It is a farther challenge to us not to tell God when or how this is going to happen, Oh what shape we think the coming of his peace and salvation should take. As the second letter of Peter puts it, with the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like one day. His ways are not always, Isaiah tells us elsewhere. But we can be certain that his desire is for all to come to repentance, for all to turn and find him and not perish through the destructiveness of our own perversity, or of our corporate perversity, and the way this plays out, one against another.

So whether it is for ourselves and the strains and stresses of our lives, or our hopes and fears for our loved ones; or whether it is for the images and accounts of unspeakable atrocities around the world; Advent reminds us to live in holiness and hope: the sure and certain hope of the Christ child, who comes as the light for our darkness, the dawn from on high breaking upon us; whose light always shines no matter how terrible the darkness; and who one day will sweep away all death, destruction and darkness so we may live in his light forever.

Knowing this, Archbishop Hosam could say:

Let Advent be for us a time of expectation through prayer, worship, and acts of kindness: 'Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield. For our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you.' Psalm 33:20-22

So let us dare to say this too – and stand in solidarity with the Christians of the Holy Land as they seek to bring the peace of Christ. The Archbishop and Bishops of Wales' appeal this Christmas is to support them through the Anglican and Roman Catholic charity, the Friends of the Holy Land. We have therefore decided that the collection given at our Crib Service at 4pm on Christmas Eve will be given to them - do join us for this. Let us also keep praying with them, and let us be strengthened by their prayers.

I will end with further words from Archbishop Hosam:

We are all concerned about the future and feel fear and uncertainty. But our faith is stronger than these anxieties and leads us to continue our ministries through our churches and institutions as a living witness. Indeed, every ministry we offer is nothing but a continuation of Jesus ministry on earth. For he is the teacher, healer, and savior. He continues to work through us as individuals and as a church. Advent offers us a time for renewing these ministries, as well as rededicating our individual and communal talents and spiritual devotions to God.

May that also, by God's grace be our aspiration and our firm commitment, for ourselves and for our own church also. Amen.

<https://www.anglicannews.org/news/2023/12/the-anglican-archbishop-in-jerusalem-launches-advent-and-christmas-appeal.aspx>

<https://www.churchinwales.org.uk/en/news-and-events/churches-urged-to-support-christmas-appeal-for-the-holy-land/>