

LIVING IN THE DAY

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:11-14

Jerusalem. Has there ever been a more important, a more significant, a more disputed city than this city which King David took from the Jebusites to be the capital of his Kingdom? Ever since then, and since Solomon built the first temple, it has been of prime significance to the Jews. And then Jesus came, and he died and rose in Jerusalem, and the Church was born there, and so for Christians it has held immense importance. And then Mohammed named Jesus as an important prophet, and so Jerusalem became tremendously important to the Muslims as well - the third holy city of Islam after Mecca and Medina.

The Crusades were fought over it, peoples and religions have come and gone from it, and still we cannot begin to hope for peace in the troubled Middle East unless we can find a peace for Jerusalem. Even this week various powers have been trying yet again to find a solution. But it is complex. Recently Andrew was describing a computer game he had played at the house of a friend. He went through it in great detail, and concluded, "and at the end all the baddies are dead." I commented that this seemed a bit harsh. "But they are baddies," insisted my son. They do very bad things all the time. So you can't win unless they are dead."

Ah, for the simple world of children's games. Real life is far more complex. There are no obvious "goodies" or "baddies" in the Jerusalem situation. No one group always behaves in exemplary fashion. No one group is much worse than any other, taking their various track records over the years.

And yet people still come to Jerusalem, whose name is traditionally, if inaccurately, thought to mean "city of peace." They come from various traditions, seeking God. Just as Isaiah foresaw, people come from many nations, and say "*Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord... that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.*" And yet, while Isaiah saw this as something which would unite the peoples, that is not the case. There is no more divided city than Jerusalem. It is divided into Jewish and Arab Palestinian quarters. It is claimed as the capital city of two peoples. And on a religious level, there are countless different faith groups who vie to be the main purveyor of truth in the city. Even within the faith traditions, they cannot always agree, and it is most confusing to be shown different garden tombs, or sites for Golgotha, depending on who is your guide. Jerusalem is a city which has very seldom been at peace.

But Isaiah knows that peace is the very first thing we learn when we seek God, if it really is God whom we are seeking. The act of seeking God, never mind the wonder of finding him, should lead us to turn away from human rivalry and bitterness. If it doesn't, then is it really God we are seeking, or are we using God as an excuse for seeking our own advantage?

The very first thing that we should do is to turn away from discord, to make no provision for a fight. The picture of turning swords into ploughshares has often been taken figuratively, but Isaiah meant it literally. He meant that people would take the swords and re-work the metal, so that they couldn't turn back to fighting again, even if they were provoked. What Isaiah says is that when people really seek God they give up the works of darkness. They don't just turn quietly leaving them aside, but they take the things of darkness - swords - and hammer them out so that they're unrecognisable. As swords they are gone. The metal they are made of is now used for another purpose, for God's good purposes. And that is what Paul is telling the

Romans as well.

“Long is our winter, dark is our night” goes our Advent song. Of course that context for Advent is only applicable in these parts of the world. In other places Advent marks the longest days of the year, and the warmest. But here things are getting pretty dark in the morning. I expect if I asked I would find very few of us who do not get up before daybreak these days. I know that I have a good two hours of my day gone before there is appreciable light outside.

These dark mornings, when it doesn't look like day, it can be difficult to get up and get on with life. We may feel more reluctant to heave ourselves out of bed than we do on the light summer mornings, but all the same we do it. We get up and we dress for the day anyway. We do it because we believe that the day, short as it is, is coming. In fact we would be very surprised indeed if the day were not to follow on from the night - eventually.

In the same way, Paul calls his readers, he calls us, to remember that the day is coming. *“Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first became believers”* he says, and that is still true. He is looking ahead to the time when the whole world will be transformed by being a part of God's Kingdom. This, he says, will be like day coming, while at the moment all seems as dark as night. But the thing that as Christians we can be sure of, is that the night is passing away. And that being so, we should get up and get dressed for the day.

One way of understanding Advent is as a time for getting dressed for the day. The old world, what Paul calls the “present age” is rumbling on. Most people are ordering their lives in accordance with its style and habits. This includes using the darkness for behaving in unseemly, immoral ways. But the new world has already broken in. If you could climb to the top of a high mountain and look east, you would see the first streaks of dawn break across the night sky. God's new age has begun, and will shortly come to fulfilment. So those who follow Jesus, whose life, death and resurrection inaugurated the new age, are commanded to live already according to the rules of the new world. The day has begun, and even though most people are still asleep it is time to get up and get on with it.

As we prepare for Christ's coming, and for the coming of his Kingdom, as we prepare for the coming of the light we are to live as though that light were already shining. And that is more than just words. Paul tells us to live honourably. He thinks of typical night-time misbehaviours: and mentions that we should not be drunk, not be immoral in our relationships, but then he forgets the night-time context of what he is saying and says too that we should not be always quarrelling or allowing ourselves to be jealous of others. The point is that we are not to think that we can hide our behaviour in the darkness. We are children of the light and we are to live as though that light were already shining. Indeed we are to allow that light to shine through us.

We are to get up and get dressed, so, as we said to the children, we can be ready whenever Christ comes, so that we can be ready whenever his Kingdom advances. And what are we to dress ourselves in? We are to put on the armour of light. We are to put on Christ, taking Jesus as our model in life and behaviour. In Isaiah's terms, we are to take the matter, or metal, of our lives, and hammer it out till all the possible bad purposes are done away with, and our lives are used only for God's good purposes. We are to live as citizens of heaven.

Advent is a time of preparation. No doubt already many of you will have lists made, physically or mentally, of the things you want to do to be ready for Christmas. But we are getting ready for more than a celebration - important and wonderful

though that is. We are getting ready for the coming of the day, for God's Kingdom illuminating the whole world. And salvation is nearer to us now than when we first became believers.

In the ancient church Advent, a bit like Lent, was a time to give things up. It should still be a time to turn away from what is wrong, and make an effort to do what is right. It should be a time for making peace, not doing battle. It should be a time for hammering away at our old destructive habits so that we can let our lives be remade after the image of Christ.

This takes concentration, it takes time, it takes effort. For some of us the preparations for the way the world want us to celebrate Christmas means that of all times in the year, this is the least good for making this sort of effort. We are too busy with the expectations of others. But God has his expectations as well. He expects us to live as children of light. He expects us to live in the day, not according to the normality and expectations of the night. He expects us to be ready to welcome the coming King. What is most important to you? You will know if you honestly evaluate the way you spend your time. For no matter how busy we are, we always make time for the things that matter most to us.

This Advent, may we make the time to put aside all the worldly expectations, and take up our hammer to get to work on what is destructive in our lives. This Advent may we take the time to learn from Christ how to live as his children; how, even in the darkness, to live in his daylight.

Amen.