

**1st Sunday in Advent Sermon; The Hidden God** Isaiah  
64:1-8 and Mk 13:24-end

Advent! Waiting for Jesus! We know Christmas will happen this year, even if a little different, but the waiting is still the same each year. Being married to Father Bob this means doing the liturgical calendar properly. We don't sing Christmas carols in Advent – we have to sing “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus” until Christmas Eve when I can sing “Silent Night” or “Away in a Manger”. If advent is preparation for Christmas, it can be very difficult to “get into the Christmas spirit” without the good old carols, and for me, this makes presents a challenge to enter into the spirit of waiting hope.

Our reading from Isaiah has something of that flavour, of waiting for the Messiah. Isaiah is old when he writes this and has returned with his people from exile. They return to a city in ruin, a temple in ruin, and their lives in ruin. These were dark days for the people of Israel, and it had been a long time since anyone had seen God do mighty works. Isaiah, like many of us, moans to God to “tear the heavens” once again, to DO something. He is longing for God to act. He is fed up with waiting, he wants action. Standing in the rubble of a lost temple, he cries out for God to be visible, to show Himself.

Isaiah has a good old moan “For you have hidden your face from us.” He even blames God for the human condition “Behold, you were angry, and we sinned.” This bleak passage from Isaiah is a great one for beginning the Advent season because it is filled with a yearning for God to act, to cut past the wait and get to the hope.

I think this yearning is a good model for us as we prepare for Christmas ourselves. We need to reflect on our deep need for Christ, and the need the world has.

But, in the waiting, can you identify with these words of Isaiah about the hidden-ness of God? The deeply anxious ‘where are you’. I suspect that most of us can. Have you ever stood amid the ruins of your faith and prayed, but felt like you were only talking to yourself? Have you ever stood beside the bed of one in pain and prayed for God's help, but felt that God was far away? Have you ever felt that God had been hidden for too long? Have you ever wanted to God to do something, something like “tear the heavens and come down?” All of us have felt that way at one time or another, maybe more so this year, where many of us will have felt alone and helpless.

Perhaps those who feel this way are struggling the most to get ready for Christmas. How can you properly enjoy Christmas when you feel that God is absent? How can you experience the presence of God when all you feel is the hidden-ness, the inaccessibility of God?

And yet often in the very midst of our pain and trouble, the first sign of hope and joy can be found and experienced, even if hidden in the midst of sadness.

We are only ready for the light when we have sat and waited a while in the dark. We are ready for the presence of God only when we have experienced the absence of God.

As you know, our son Rob has gone to Dubai for several months, and we miss him. But that absence is not a void. It is not as if he never existed. No! The absence has a specific shape – the shape of our son who is away now but will be back soon. His absence somehow makes us more aware of him. Maybe we just took him for granted when he was easy to contact every day. We often ask one another, “I wonder what’s Rob doing now? How is Rob today? And funnily, his absence actually makes him present.

Surely, something like that is true of our relationship with God. The hidden-ness of God is not an empty void, not since Jesus came and showed us what God is really like. Jesus, “is the image of the invisible God...” Jesus puts a shape to the absence. Jesus offers a face to our God. And when we sense the absence, we cannot help but focus on His shape, His presence and long for him to be with us.

Israel yearned for God to make Himself known. And that yearning was gloriously answered in Jesus Christ. And our yearning is still answered in him. So this time of waiting in plain song can lead to joyous sounds of Hail the Heaven born Prince of Peace.

Maybe that’s why the church has the season of Advent in the weeks before Christmas. If we are to see the light that dawns among us in Christ, we must sit awhile in the dark. If we are to hear the songs of the angels, we must first be silent. If we are to know the presence of God, we must first sense the absence of God. But not for too long, this year has been hard enough so sing those Carols, put up that tree, but prepare your heart first! If 2020 has taught us anything it is that joy has to be sought deliberately, and I trust and pray that your joy will be found in our Saviour, the ever present, un-hidden Christ, the light of the world. Amen