

A Call to Action

The sermon given by Rev Sheila Cameron
at the St Margaret's Sung Eucharist on Advent Sunday, 27 November 2022
The readings were: Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Matthew 24:36-44



If we are to take our Advent readings seriously this morning, then we cannot avoid thinking about what the future holds for us. There's a *continuity* between the world we inhabit now and the world to come and our texts all recognise this. The world we live in today, with all its trials and tribulations, will one day come to an end. We all know this, but how should we respond as Christians?

People today are very anxious about the future, or else they just can't see much of a future for themselves at all. Just after the turn of the millennium, Martin Rees, a Cambridge scientist who specialises in cosmology and space science, published a book entitled *Our Final Century: Will Civilisation Survive the 21st Century?* One reviewer quoted on the cover wrote: "This is not [a] futurological diatribe saying that the end is nigh, but a lucid, calm, profoundly well-informed work by a distinguished scientist" which takes a logical and humane look at "the multitude of threats facing the 21st century from error and terror in the nuclear, biological and environmental spheres."

Yes, people have been taking the idea of the end of the world very seriously indeed of late and the news only seems to get worse by the week. And today, at the beginning of Advent, our lectionary urges us to .prepare for what is to come, but the dominant message of the season is one of *hope*.

And we hold this hope about God's future in the middle of the world's tragedies. It's a sad fact that there are many who can't imagine any kind of future for themselves at all, because of appalling personal circumstances, or because the future is something over which they have no control. Simply surviving from day to day is their immediate concern, crying out for an end to their present suffering or a release from their captivity. This month, the Mother's Union is supporting a programme of prayer entitled "16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence." This began on Friday and runs until Saturday 10 December, International Human Rights Day. Today, on the first Sunday in Advent, we're asked to pray especially for children who are victims of domestic violence. The Mother's Union reminds us of how precious every human being is to God, from even before the moment of their conception. We read in their Prayer Diary for today: "Before children are even formed in the womb, they are known and loved by God," This reminds us of Psalm 139: "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. ... Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed" (Psalm 139:13, 16).





Our God has a special concern for those who are vulnerable. There are many stories we might think about that will move us to compassion and then to action: stories of the abuse of people with disabilities; stories of elder abuse, of the victims of trafficking, of the exclusion or rejection of people we regard as threats or social outcasts for one reason or another: perhaps you can think of someone in this category. It might be someone begging on the street that you would prefer to avoid, perhaps a young person who has become homeless because they have run away from a violent parent. Whoever they are, we're urged to listen to them, to take their stories seriously, to do what we can to help them, to help give them a future worth living.

In our Christian view of the future, what we're looking at is the fulfilment of our *trust in God*. We know the way is hard going. Isaiah gives us hope because he shows us the future not as bleak and terrifying but as a new beginning, following a transformation of the reality in which we live, liberation from the captivity in which we have been held. What is striking for me in this text is that *continuity* I spoke of a few minutes ago; a vision of the future that sees the coming of God's kingdom as something happening *here and now* in our real, physical world. Those whose sights are set on God, those who want to learn to walk in the way of the Lord and be instructed by God's commandments, are promised a time of peace when the whole earth will put aside the weapons of war, escape from the cycles of violence, beat swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks. Surely that might be achievable on a personal level, if not

globally – at least to begin with. The people the prophet is addressing have known the devastation of war; in chapter 1 of Isaiah we read, “Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence, aliens devour your land” (1:7). Not much has changed today, we might think. Many lands have had the same experience and then have known a time of rebuilding and renewal when peace eventually comes, but often that peace seems fragile. A deeply felt, long-lasting peace will come only when human differences are put aside and our common humanity celebrated as a gift from God.

For many years now, I've supported the charity Embrace the Middle East (formerly BibleLands), initially through their child sponsorship scheme. This gave me an opportunity to visit Lebanon some years ago to see the work of the charity at first hand, and particularly the school I'd been supporting. I was very impressed by the work of Embrace's local project partners in fostering peace in a country recovering from a devastating civil war. One school we visited in the Bekaa Valley¹ was typical of a very practical brand of Christianity. The Director was a man with a vision of how Christian values could change life quite radically. He spoke with great clarity and urgency about how his chief objective was to teach Christian and Muslim children to live and work together, simply to become friends, and we sensed that for him and his country this approach was really a matter of life or death. Offering children traumatised by violence a loving and nurturing environment in which they and their families could learn to respect and care for one another was a truly inspired ministry. Christians like this head teacher

¹ The Schneller School





are vital witnesses to our call to love our neighbours, whoever they may be, and in this case to care for vulnerable children scarred by a terrible war.

Isaiah sees the house of the Lord as being the place from which the whole earth will receive *instruction in the ways of peace*. The image of *light* is also very important in this passage. Our text ends with the call to action: "O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!" Our life in Christ is a movement from darkness into light, from ignorance, depression, fear or anxiety into assurance of God's presence with us, mediated by Christ, the one in whom God took our human nature on himself and redeemed it. With Christ we live in light, whatever the darkness of the world that surrounds us. This is the good news in which we rejoice and which we proclaim to the world in our speech, our attitude and our demeanour. In the light of Christ, everything is possible, here and now. Not when this world ends and another one begins, but right here and now.

Our Gospel reminds us that the world beyond this one is not a remote, hypothetical place but a reality that can break upon us at any time. We are to be prepared; in other words, we are to live *here and now* as if we were living *then*, in the presence of God. It's here and now that we can know the joy of walking in the light of Christ and the safety of dwelling in the house of the Lord.

We pray that during this holy season of Advent, our Christian community might be a place where many who have been traumatised by what they have experienced in this life may find peace and joy and safety in his presence. Amen.

The text of our image was overlaid on a photograph by Joshua Rodriguez hosted on Unsplash.