

Four candles by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 28th November 2021 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings:

Romans 8:18-25 The hope of all creation

Isaiah 11:1-9 The Messiah's future reign of peace

Luke 1:39-45 Elizabeth and her baby rejoice at the arrival of the mother of God.

1 John 4:7-21 The meaning of love

Introduction

How are you with waiting? There are different kinds of waiting. There's the frustrating kind of waiting, such as when you're trying to get through to a real person on the phone and keep being told that "your call is important to us". But there's also the joyful, excited kind of waiting, such as if you're looking forward to the visit of a family member or friend you haven't seen for a long time, or when children are full of excitement as they wait for Christmas.

Advent is a time of waiting and preparation. There are two aspects to this. On the one hand we are preparing for Christmas, and as we do so we think back to the waiting which the people of Israel did as they looked forward to the time when their Messiah would come to set them free from oppression and set up the Kingdom of God. We reflect on the promises of God in the Old Testament, and trace his plan from the promise to Eve in the Garden of Eden that her seed

would bruise the serpent's head¹, through the calling of Abraham and the people of Israel, through the prophecies about the coming of the Messiah, to the birth of Jesus as a descendant of King David in David's birthplace, Bethlehem².

But as Christians we know that the calling of the people of Israel was only part of God's greater plan for the redemption of the world. We believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah, and that he fulfilled God's plan for salvation by dying on the Cross and rising again to bring us forgiveness of sins and a place in the heavenly Paradise. But we also recognise that the fulfilment of God's plan is not yet complete. The rule of the Messiah in the Kingdom of God will one day bring an end to injustice and suffering. There must be a reckoning for all the evil that has been committed on the earth, and a reward for those who have been faithful to God. And so Advent is also a time for looking forward to that fulfilment, which we speak of as Christ's Second Coming as Judge.

One way of marking the period of Advent is to light a candle each Sunday. The four candles can represent different things, but tonight I want to look at the four Advent themes of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love, which have been the topics of our four bible readings.

¹ Genesis 3:15. The seed, i.e offspring of the Eve is interpreted as Christ, and the serpent as Satan. The Bruising of the head is interpreted as Christ's victory over evil on the Cross.

² See Matthew 2:4-6

Hope

Our first reading was part of St Paul's letter to the Romans, and comes from the wonderful chapter 8 which speaks of the purposes of God for the whole of creation. With modern awareness of climate change and biodiversity loss, we're increasingly noticing the "groaning" of creation that Paul writes about. But there is hope that one day the whole creation will be liberated as God brings his purposes for the world to a completion. As we allow the Spirit of God to dwell in our hearts, we find ourselves also "groaning" in anticipation. Paul uses the image of a woman in labour. The experience may be grim, but it is temporary, and will result in the joy of new birth. And so God will bring a new world to birth, a world in which the glory that will be revealed will make the sufferings of this present time pale into insignificance. What keeps us going through it all is hope - which means looking forward to the future with confidence. Of course, as Paul says, it requires belief in a future which is yet unseen, but that belief is grounded in our experience of being called by God, and being saved by the self-giving sacrifice of Jesus for us, as he explains in the following verses³.

Peace

What will this new world that God is bringing to birth be like? Our second reading was one of Isaiah's most beautiful prophecies, which speaks first of all about the promised King who will reign with wisdom, righteousness, justice and faithfulness. In his kingdom there will be no room for

³ Romans 8:30-31

violence, hostility or fear. It is a place where the wolf will lie down with the lamb, and a child will lead the calf and the lion together. When I think of the mindless cruelty in today's world, and the callousness which allows the innocent to suffer through indifference and greed, the phrase "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain" brings tears to my eyes.

This is a picture of the Hebrew concept of Shalom – which means peace, harmony and well-being thrown into one. What is the key to this? Isaiah tells us that it is when "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea". What he means is not that people will *know about* the Lord, but that people will *know him personally*. It's that relationship with God that transforms us and enables us to become the people he intended us to be – people who are at peace with God, with ourselves, with each other and with the creation. The peace that Christ brings is not just for the future – we can live it now.

Joy

The passage I chose for joy was that meeting between the virgin Mary and her older cousin Elizabeth. It comes just after the archangel Gabriel has appeared to Mary to announce her calling to be the mother of the Son of God⁴. Gabriel has told Mary that Elizabeth, who was infertile and is past child-bearing years, is expecting her own baby, and so Mary goes to visit her. She knows that Elizabeth will understand and believe her story.

⁴ Luke 1:26-38

What happens as Mary arrives at the house and calls Elizabeth's name is a spontaneous outburst of joy. And, remarkably, it begins with Elizabeth's unborn baby, now of 6 months' gestation, "leaping for joy" in her womb, as she describes it. You may remember that Elizabeth's husband Zechariah was told that John would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb⁵, so perhaps this should not be such a surprise to us.

But how did Elizabeth know what had happened inside Mary? Perhaps Mary had sent her a message in advance. But whatever the case, Elizabeth is filled with joy as she recognises the enormous blessing God has brought to both of them and to the world. And a few verses later Mary bursts into a prophetic message, which we know as the Magnificat, praising God for the way he chooses those who are of low status in the world's eyes and raises them up by his mighty power⁶.

Like Mary and Elizabeth, when we realise how God is bringing his good purposes for the world into effect, and how he has even chosen us to be part of this, we too will be filled with joy. The joy of Christ's birth is not just for Christmas – it is for every day.

Love

And finally we come to love. There are many kinds of love. But the fullest meaning of love, according to the apostle John, is expressed in the love that God showed for us:

⁵ Luke 1:15

⁶ Luke 1:46-55

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins⁷.

God, John explains, is the source of love. This is the kind of love that seeks the wellbeing of another, even when this is to our own disadvantage. When we learn to love others like this, we are allowing something of God himself to be manifested through us.

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Christmas is supposed to be a time of goodwill, but it can also be a time when patience is tested and relationships can become strained. How important it is for us to remember what Christmas is all about – in the famous words from John’s gospel:

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.

Christmas is about God’s love for us, shown in Jesus. That’s the true Christmas present. Everything else is just the wrapping paper.

If we choose each day to meditate on God’s love for us, and choose to follow the path of love, then we will have no need to fear Christ’s judgement. As John writes a few verses later in his first letter:

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we

⁷ 1 John 4:10 NRSV

in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear⁸.

Conclusion

Hope, peace, joy and love – four of the themes of Advent. As we wait in hope for the fulfilment of God’s promises to bring justice, healing and peace to our troubled world, we remind ourselves of what God has already promised and accomplished in the gift of his Son Jesus, and his death and resurrection to bring us life. And so his peace, joy and love can be ours, every day. And not just ours to keep, but ours to share and give away.

Let us use this Advent to reflect on God’s promises and his good purposes for the world, to repent of the ways in which we have disregarded his will for our lives, and to seek the guidance and strength of the Holy Spirit, so that we may live out the values of hope, peace, joy and love day by day. Then, perhaps, we and those around us will experience the true blessings of Christmas. Amen.

⁸ 1 John 4:17-18 NRSV