

First Sunday of Advent  
Year A - 27/11/2016

Isaiah 2:1-5  
Psalm 122  
Romans 13:9-14  
Matthew 24:36-44

**In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...**

“O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!” (Isaiah 2:5). The light of the Lord...

While there are many things I love about living in this great Southern Land, and I couldn't really imagine living anywhere else, I'd have to say that some of our liturgical themes don't work as well for us here as they do for our Anglican brothers and sisters in the northern hemisphere. And at no other time do I sense this more acutely than during this season of Advent, that we begin today.

You see, *light* is one of the major themes of Advent, along with the weekly themes of hope, peace, love, and joy. And if you can imagine, those currently living in the northern hemisphere are actually longing for light, as their days get shorter, their nights longer, and the winter closes in. So, for them, symbols such as the Advent wreath, with its brightly burning candles make a lot of sense - as the brightness of the flame reminds them to maintain their hope, even as the natural light fades.

For us, however, at this time of the year we enjoy the coming summer, with enough natural light outside even at 9 o'clock at night to feel safe as we walk, and the dawn coming early. Do we sense a longing for light at this time?? Probably not so much.

Yet, Isaiah reminds us today, that even if we feel there is enough sunlight in our lives, that we should still long for something more - the light of God, in which we might always walk in confidence.

A few weeks ago now I attended a seminar at Trinity College, which was about how to consider Matthew's gospel in Advent, and how we might see Matthew's writings as somehow complementary to the readings from the Old Testament. I came away from that seminar with a resolution - and that is that I will focus more consciously on the message we receive this season from the Hebrew Scriptures - where the Prophet Isaiah is our principal voice.

Because this writing, too, was for God's people - indeed God's *chosen* people. People who had no sense of the sort of Messiah that we as Christians claim. So let us, even just for today, resist the temptation to rush ahead to our Christian Scriptures - and resist the temptation to read everything in Isaiah as somehow relating to Jesus. I believe that to do this allows us a deeper understanding and appreciation of God's faithfulness and constancy, from even before the beginning of Creation.

So, what did it mean for the people in Isaiah's time to hear the command and the call from Isaiah to walk in the light of God?

Firstly - who was Isaiah, and in what context did he write? We believe Isaiah to be an eighth century prophet, though the book of Isaiah as a whole did not appear until later. Assuming an eighth century origin, these oracles, such as the one we hear this morning, were pronounced while the nation of Judah still existed, though its northern neighbor had succumbed to the Assyrians.

In Isaiah 2, Isaiah addresses a word from the Lord to the people of Judah and Jerusalem. That is his congregation. Today, we have a beautiful call to peace, with almost universalistic tendencies. If we read farther into the chapter, we will encounter a diatribe against those in the nation who have followed foreign idols. Thus, all this is ultimately a call to return to the God of Jacob (Israel).

To get a sense of the vision, we need to remember ancient Judah's geo-political location. For centuries, it found itself at the crossroads of empires.

It might not have been special in terms of resources or having a powerful military, but it stood on the pathway between Egypt and the various empires that emerged to the east in Mesopotamia and Persia. It was a land where battles were often fought and thus life could be precarious. Peace was something to hope for, even as the people lived with the possibility that the armies of competing empires could come marching through at any moment, trampling on this nation that was small and lacked military power. Peace would be beneficial to the people. It also might help the nation survive intact.

One way to keep the peace was to adopt the religions of its more powerful neighbors. Isaiah wants to turn the tables on this idea—reminding the people that the God of Israel was no small territorial deity, but rather the one who sits on the highest mountain, the one to whom all the nations will look for guidance.

Isaiah holds before the people the image of their city as a place where God's glory will dwell: God will himself live in the city, will establish his home on the mountains that surround her, will himself teach the world the ways of peace. And because God is at the heart of the city, all nations will seek God's presence and peace: 'Come, let us go to the mountain of the Lord ... that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths'.

Because God is present at the heart of the city, the city is at peace. The city experiences the light of God, and is truly enabled to be the City where Shalom, will reign. People will turn from the self-seeking, self-serving ways of the past: will turn from the worship of riches and the armed struggles to accumulate greater wealth, influence and power.

They shall, as those beautiful words proclaim, beat their swords into ploughshares, will plant rather than destroy, will build up community rather than tear down and divide, and will 'walk in the way of the Lord', whose will for his city and his world is peace.

This Advent, may we share that same determination as we work for the fulfilment of God's law of love in the places in which we dwell. This Advent, may we share the gladness that comes from walking in the light of God's love, as we expectantly await the day of God's coming.

In the name of God. Amen.