

What are you hoping for? For Christmas, for yourself or your family, for the Cathedral, for the world? Or even from this sermon?

As I was preparing for this morning, and this very special season of Advent, it occurred to me that a sermon is a little like one of those Hello Fresh meals which can be delivered to your door. As I understand, they include a recipe, and all the ingredients you need, which have been selected and part prepared for you - but the final work is down to you. A sermon is a little like that - in the end, you have to do the work yourself, to ensure that it feeds you and shapes you going forward.

So, what can I lay before you this morning, on this Advent Sunday? First, the context. Advent is one of two big, chunky penitential seasons in the church's liturgical year - the way we make our way through the different seasons of the year, more or less following Christ's life and ministry, and all that flowed from that. A penitential season is a time for penance - for recognising what needs changing - for putting things right that are wrong - or, more accurately, giving God space to put right those things that are wrong, beginning with God's forgiveness and healing, and then allowing time for God to work with us to bring the world and our lives back in line with how God wants them to be.

The Church's year is said to begin with Advent, *today*. It's the day when we give thanks that God created us, and that God didn't abandon us when we, as a human race, made such a mess of all that God had entrusted us with. Of the two penitential seasons of the year, it seems to me that Advent is the one for us to think globally - of the darkness that threatens to engulf the world. In the spring, in our second penitential season of Lent, we will be urged to think locally, of the darkness present in our own personal lives. Although they may sound gloomy, they are both seasons of hope - because they are times when we invite God to get to get to work on our world, and ourselves, to put things right. They are times of Honesty and Hope - facing up to the truth of how things are, but doing so in the light of a loving gaze of God in Jesus. Like this Cathedral, speaking truth about the world and about God. Our text, 'Father forgive' speaks to both of these - Father forgive us, personally and individually, Father forgive the world for all we as a human race have done with what you entrusted to us.

So, if this morning's sermon is a recipe and a set of ingredients, I've tried to set the context for the meal I'm inviting you to make. Let's have a look at the ingredients, in the scripture texts which have been selected for us by those who put together our lectionary, the pattern of reading our way through key passages of the Bible over a three year period. Isaiah is one of the major prophets of the Hebrew bible, what Christians call the Old Testament. His book spans a number of generations of writers, all of whom take the same name, and it contains a mixture of hope, promise, judgement, challenge - and a history of how God and God's people worked things out over as much as two hundred years or so. Today's passage is very early in the book, and makes promises about a time when God's people will be recognised as the world's leaders, respected and recognised as the source of how to get things right in human affairs, teaching the nations how to live in peace with one another.

How do you think that's working out? If that's the first element of this dish we are seeking to create this Sunday morning, do you think we've opened up our box of ingredients and found something that's not in great condition? Does it ring true to suggest that the world would look to either Jerusalem, or the church, the new Jerusalem to work out how to live in peace? And if not, why not?

If you read on in Isaiah chapter 2, and into chapter 3 and the chapters that follow, you will discover that God knows this will be the case. The very next verse after today's passage begins to confront the people of Israel with the reality of their lives, where possessions are valued above people, where the worship of human achievements is valued over the worship of God, where God's order has broken down in so many ways. Yet God does not give up on the people he loves and has chosen, but the way to become whom God wants them to be will be long and hard.

If this was a recipe, then, we would probably want to say don't just take the bits of the fruit and veg and meat you like the look of, because it's the whole fruit, the whole veg, the whole joint you need to take and use - it is in the richness and depth and fullness of flavour that you will find nourishment, which will give you what you need for your life. This is where we start, that God has a purpose for his people in the world, but this people need some work doing on them for God to be able too use them.

Let's see what else we have on the table - ah yes, the gospel! I wonder what you made of that as you were listening, when it was read? I guess this is the place where it becomes clear that one of the tasks of the person preach is to do some of the preparation for you - and I can bring you the fruits of my research. Some people have preached sermons on this text which started with jolly stories about whether you are a person who likes to be well prepared or who is rather last minute? Others preach about whether you are the sort of person who likes surprises, perhaps surprise parties! I confess I'm not very keen on jolly sermon stories, especially when what Jesus is talking about is serious - it's a genre of scripture called apocalyptic, which is about the 'end times', when God will finally intervene decisively and catastrophically in human history, to bring all things to a conclusion. It's an area of theology which is conjectural, full of picture language to communicate something which we cannot begin to understand, because it's about a future which we cannot really imagine breaking into our present,. But we know it will be big.

That's what Jesus is talking to his audience about. The heart of the matter is that this is the moment when it will become completely clear that God is in charge. All human forms of power and pride, self justification or personal aggrandisement will be swept away. The illustrations he uses should not be pressed too far. I've searched commentaries to discover what is meant by the stories of the two in the field, or the two women grinding. Rather wonderfully, there are two equal and opposite interpretations. One is that the person taken is swept away in judgement, like those swept away and drowned by the flood in the time of Noah. Alternatively, the person taken is the one saved, caught up to meet Jesus in the air, following Paul's words in Thessalonians, popularised in novels and films about the 'rapture'. I love the fact that we just don't know - so we are left with the simple challenge that we should make sure we are ready, always prepared, so well as we can be, to be part of God's future. And that means being the people God has made us to be, doing the things God has prepared for us to do.

Some people have taken Jesus' challenge to respond as the entire content of the gospel. I've spoken once or twice before about the value of existentialism, which challenges us to be authentically ourselves. The theologian Rudolf Bultmann a hundred years ago was perhaps the most famous of these, stripping out all divine or miraculous content from the gospels, leaving just this challenge from Jesus to be fully human. But this also misses the point - Jesus is calling his listeners to be ready for the day of the Lord - not the day of humanity. It is God who is at the centre of this new day, not ourselves, who will make it possible.

This brings us to the final part of our ingredients - the day of the Lord. What is that day? Advent Sunday looks ahead to the final bringing to a completion of all things. It also says, be ready for that day - in effect it says this is the day of the Lord, each day is the day of the Lord when we commit to God's future, for ourselves personally and our world.

What does that mean for you? This is where you have to take this sermon and apply it to yourself. Where you say, this is what I believe God hopes for the world, and this is what I'm going to do to make it happen. This is what I believe God hopes for me, and this is what I'm going to do about it. This is how I'm going to live into the future I believe God wants for world and for me. A future in which every beautiful human being can live in peace and dignity, in security of home and nourishment, a future which we have allowed God to create through us. It might mean, in these days leading up to Christmas when we celebrate Jesus coming to us as child, looking at how we use our finances to support God's work; it might mean looking to our relationships with family or friends, or colleagues, or whoever else. It might mean preparing for a new year's resolution about becoming politically or socially active.

Ask yourself, "If not now, when? If not me, who?" "If not now, when? If not me, who?" And be ready for the day of the Lord - for that day is today.

*Now to the one who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. Eph 3. 20,21*