

Reflection - Advent Sunday
03-12-2023
St Cuthbert's Anglican Church – Tweed Heads

Isaiah 64: 1-9 Lord we have forgotten you, but please don't forget us

Psalms 80: 1-7, 17-19 Restore us, Let your face shine upon us.

1 Corinthians 1: 1-9 Paul give thanks that Christ is in them.

Mark 13: 24-37 Jesus tells about his return, and to be watchful

Introduction

"Happy New Year" to you all this morning.

Today is Advent Sunday, the first day of our Church Calendar, today we begin Year B of our three year reading cycle, so I thought the greeting seems appropriate.

New Year Theme - Looking back and forward

Like Lent, Advent is a time for preparation so today is the day set aside for us to start to prepare spiritually for the celebration of Christmas.

Let us start this preparation by focusing on the theme of the "New Year" and how that might relate to the readings we have heard this evening. Traditionally the New Year is a time of taking stock and making new years resolutions, so not only do we look back but we also look forward.

The reading from Isaiah this morning certainly fits that pattern. In verse 5 we hear:

"But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry."

Here Isaiah is looking back at the way Israel had behaved badly in the past. God's chosen people turning away from him is a common theme of the Old Testament, but this is generally followed by a return to the fold. In this instance Isaiah is asking God to assist in the reconciliation process. He uses the analogy of the potter, and we hear in verse 8

"Yet, O Lord, you are our Father, we are the clay and you are the potter, we are all the work of your hand".

So, whilst Isaiah is not quite making a new year's resolution he is looking to the future. He is praying that God will make them "the work of your hand". In this prayer he is looking to a future where Israel's people will act more in line with God's ways.

In terms of new year's resolutions, the introduction of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is not really looking back at the past, but he gives thanks, and points out what Jesus has done for them as their hope for the future. We hear in verse 8:

“He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ”.

The Gospel reading we have heard from Mark is firmly focused on the future. It is a part of a long speech of Jesus to four of the disciples: Peter, James, John and Andrew. Jesus had been telling them about the destruction of the temple. When this group asked him when it would happen, and what would be the signs, the reading this morning was part of his reply. Jesus talks of his future return, and then tells the disciples that not even he knows when it will occur. The most telling verse is probably the last, Jesus says

“And what I say to you, I say to all: KEEP AWAKE”

Reading Themes

We have had a look at all of today’s readings, and how they fit, in terms of a new year’s resolution, but what are the main themes of the readings.

The first I think is that we all fall short in trying to live our lives in accordance with God’s will. We might like to think we’re clever, but we need to remember we can do nothing without God’s help. The second is that Jesus may return at any time, and we need to be prepared.

I think the reading from Isaiah gives us the most vivid picture of our need for God and using God to help us to live our lives. God is the potter, and we are the clay. We are to be moulded, the way he wants us to be moulded. This is not always the way we might think we would like to mould ourselves. When a potter moulds clay, it is the potter who is in complete control. The potter makes the choices 1: how big or small will the piece of clay be, 2: how fast will the wheel be spun, 3: will the piece be thick or thin, short or tall, 4: will it have a handle or lid, or even a spout on the side.

God sent his son Jesus to die on a cross for us. From this, it is clear that he cares for us and wants to help us shape our lives. But how often do we consult with God in the decisions we make in moulding our daily lives? Do we daily consult the potter, or do we try to mould things the way we would like them?

I know personally as a teenager I felt God was calling me to full time ministry within the church. So I went to university, did engineering and worked in that field for 14 years. Now I know I prayed about it and decided I thought it would be beneficial for me to work in a “worldly” career before attempting to embark into full time ministry, but did God really want me to take that long? Was I really just doing what I wanted to do and not fully allowing God to mould me the way he wanted? Only God really knows the answers to these questions. But the closer we are to God, the more likely we will be able to feel the way he wants to mould us.

What can we do to ensure we are being moulded the way God wants us to be? We need to be in contact with God. It seems to me the best way we maintain this contact with God is by praying and being immersed in the scriptures.

We've recently been going through Paul's letter to the Thessalonians and in 5:17.

It says we should pray without ceasing.

With our hectic lives and the responsibilities, we have, this may seem a daunting task, but it is something we should aspire to. We all need to maintain our relationship with God, on a daily basis.

In talking of prayer, I was reminded of a story of a man in a third world country. He slept only on a mat on the ground. Each morning when he awoke, he would stand up, shake out his mat, roll it up and then say his prayers: "Dear Lord what are you and I going to do today." This prayer may be short, it may be simple, but it is a powerful witness of a man who wanted God to mould his life.

We should try to read the scriptures on a daily basis. Now there is nothing in any rule book that says this must be done, but as Christians we believe the bible has been inspired by God, for us. Surely wanting to get help from this book, on a daily basis, can only be of benefit us in discerning God's will for our lives.

Let's now look at the second main theme of the readings today. The second coming of Jesus. Jesus himself has been called an Eschatological Prophet, where eschatology is the doctrine of the last or final things, as in death and judgment. For whilst Jesus is a teacher and a healer his emphasis is on the coming 'Kingdom of God'. In verse 26 he says:

"At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory."

When he comes for the second time, Jesus made it quite clear that it could happen at any time. Not even he himself could tell them when it would happen.

We are always planning and preparing for things. At the moment, it might be Christmas parties or what presents for who. We plan church social events, we plan outings with our families, we plan and prepare to do all sorts of jobs at work, but how much have we planned, and how prepared are we if Jesus comes today.

Conclusion

In summary, the two themes seem to run hand in hand this morning. If we allow the potter to mould every part of our lives, we will be prepared for his return.

I'd like to leave you today with Jesus' words from the gospel:

"And what I say to you I say to all: KEEP AWAKE"