

Sermon from John Beckett 6th December 2015

2nd Sunday of Advent

Readings: **Philippians 1:3-11 and Luke 3:1-6**

The signs are all there. the valleys are filled in. the hills are made low. The Crooked is getting straight. The tarmac is smooth. The bypass is nearly ready! And it should be ready to drive along in time for December 25...

More important Q is will we be ready for December 25?

I don't mean Christmas shopping, Christmas decorations, Christmas cards, Christmas dinner... I mean are we ready for Jesus?

To be honest this Advent season is quite mind and soul stretching.

On the one hand we have the joy Isaiah's prophecies which look ahead to God's kingdom coming in all its fullness where everything that is crooked will be straightened out by God: he speaks of comfort for God's people, a light in the darkness, to us a child is born who will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Prince of peace – and oh how much we need him right now...

On the other hand we have the rather threatening edge that John the Baptist gives to those words of Isaiah chapter 40.

In Isaiah the emphasis is on **God** smoothing things out that are Crooked when he comes; in Saint Luke John warns us about **our need** to make sure that things that are Crooked straightened out ourselves in readiness for Jesus arrival whether he comes at first, or at his return as judge.

even Jesus began his preaching. *Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near*

So that when I hear of St Paul talking confidently that the Philippians will be pure and blameless until the day of Christ – here in verse 10 of chapter 1 I'm confused.

Because quite frankly Paul, if today was the day of Christ and we are told to expect him at any time – I know that I am not pure and blameless. I happen to know that not many of you are pure and blameless either; so what am I to feel in this Advent season.

Joyful anticipation of Christ's coming?

Or am I to feel the heat of John the Baptist's warning, or is it threat?

For when Jesus returns in glory as judge, We all have to stand before him and I know that I am part of the crookedness that needs straightening out. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4:

He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.

What will he be saying to you?

Before we try to answer that question, perhaps the most important question we ever have to answer, let's recap on a few Christian Doctrinal basics! What is God like?

- 1 On the one hand: God is love, God loves mercy. He is wonderfully Good. He delights in his creation. He wants to be in close relationship with us. He searches out those who are walking away from him.
- 2 On the other, God is also utterly holy and utterly just. Awesomely so.

Isaiah 6:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple.

[when we did the kingdom train song last week, we'd forgotten there were trains in the bible]

'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.' Cried the seraphims and Isaiah is overcome:

'Woe to me!' I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.'

Sin invokes a wrath of God against sin – this is not the same as a human rage but is His natural reaction to what is like a contaminant to the Holiness of God that cannot be 'allowed'. It's just as if you have a stain on your best shirt, it's no longer fit to wear as your best shirt like that.

The Sin in us also inevitably prevents us having an intimate relationship with the Holy God so that ultimately, there has to be a separation, a cutting off...which is why St Paul in Romans 6 concludes: *the wages of sin is death.*

Of course we don't like that, but the bible teaches us that God did not make it like that, to make things difficult for us, to make us fearful, it's just the way things are.

So, what does God do, to hold these two truths together?

That He is all loving and merciful, full of compassion but also all holy and just?

And how do we cope with them too?

Mostly we don't, do we?

Society in general, and often we as church, simply refuses to believe in judgment, in any concept of a Holy God.

Perhaps we forget that we would not respect or trust a God who was anything else?

Perhaps we believe that if God is love, he can simply forgive us anyway – choosing to ignore all the biblical and theological arguments that say it cannot simply happen like that?

Perhaps we just hope for the best?

Yet, if we do not believe in judgment, or if we believe that God will judge in our favour whatever we have done, whether we know him or not, why are we here this morning? We are not in need of any help or rescue anyway, so why even celebrate Christmas?

But we do celebrate Christmas, we do look ahead with joy because of this: Jesus is the only way to hold these paradoxes together.

For even though as Paul writes in Romans 3:

...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

He also tells us that we are also *Justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

We are 'justified'. We are seen by the judge as not guilty, because on the cross Christ took on himself our sin.

2 Cor 5:21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

As Christians, Christ lives within us – so that God looks on us and does not see us, but only sees the pure and blameless Christ. Because of what Jesus has done on the cross, **and** because of our relationship with Jesus right now, we need no longer fear judgement.!

In fact, the main thrust of Jesus' considerable though complicated teaching about judgment is about our relationship with him than about a strictly retributive sort of justice.

Certainly, our actions clearly do matter.

And there is teaching about reward or banishment from God to what we call hell – which modern scholars are beginning to think Jesus is not meaning a specific place as such where someone is sent as a *direct punishment*, but more simply as a place of separation from God, which would indeed be hellish.

For in many other places of Jesus teaching, the outcome of our judgment is seen to be much more related to our choice, our response to Jesus.

So In Luke, we have the invitations to the wedding banquet – and we are given the choice about whether we accept God’s invitation or not;

in Matthew 7, where Jesus talks about entering through the wide gate or the narrow one – again it is our choice.

In John’s gospel, Jesus explains that by choosing him now, eternal life begins right now, and then beyond with him in heaven

And so, having chosen Christ, we **can** look forward to his return in glory with assurance and without fear.

Yet you will say, I know the Christ in me is pure and blameless, but you’ve forgotten that I’m not pure or blameless.

So here’s another doctrinal paradox to remember!

For while God has done all of the foundational work alone –our “justification” , there is road building work for us to do with him - the process of “sanctification” of becoming more holy. . Paul writes Phil 2: ¹² *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,*

Our rescue from death and judgement, our salvation as the bible calls it, is entirely God’s gift. But we are not to squander it. We are not live with what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls ‘cheap grace’ – that is to take God’s forgiveness for granted.

We do need to work at it too – and Paul’s words ‘with fear and trembling’ are not meant as a slavish fear, but it’s about never losing sight of the holiness and justice of God. Learning to live up to our position as Sons and daughters of God. It’s just like road building.

Of letting him smooth out the rough places in us, lowering our hills of pride, raising up ways of justice, to create a level path.

Here’s what Paul prays for the Philippians:

⁹ *And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,* ¹⁰ *so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,* ¹¹ *filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God*

God hasn’t finished that work yet – but he will.

I love this T shirt...”**Perfect Man – under construction**”.

Paul writes chapter 1 verse 6 : I am ...*confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

He’s working on me and you to make a straight path within me and within each of us for God’s coming and indwelling, and through us as Christ’s body on earth,

This Advent, we can truly look forward to Christmas to celebrate the start of God’s rescue for us from fear of death and judgment,

And we can truly look forward to his return, joy of seeing our Lord face to face and his kingdom coming in all its fullness

In the meantime we have road building work to continue to do, so am I looking forwards to the new road? You bet!

Come Holy Spirit of truth speak to our hearts...

Final prayer as Paul prayed for the Thessalonians 1, 5:23-24: *May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*