Sermon – Advent 2

This week I’ve been into Meadows First School to give their Advent assembly. One of the themes I talked about, was the need to wait patiently for the great Adventure of Jesus to begin.

There are not many words in English that begin with the prefix ‘Advent’ but – with the exception of a couple of obscure meanings that medics or botanists might pick me up on – all the words in English that begin with the prefix Advent have meanings that reveal something about the Christian understanding of this season….

Adventitious means ‘coming from outside’

Adventurism means having a ‘willingness to take risks’

Adventurous means being ‘open to new experiences’

And of course, an Adventure is to go on an exciting and daring trip

Advent is a season of expectation and preparation for God’s most daring and risky experiment of all time – the great risk of sharing the divine nature with us in human form.

But Advent is not just about what God is doing…it’s also a recognition that God’s incarnation in Jesus comes with an invitation to us to join in with his work. Advent is a time when we should prepare afresh how we might respond to the gift of God in Jesus.

Depending on your tradition, the four Sundays of Advent often cover different themes, week by week.

One set of themes focus on key people that are part of the narrative ahead of Jesus’ birth. Each week we might consider in turn the Patriarchs, the Prophets, John the Baptist and finally Mary, the mother of Jesus.

An older set of themes sound rather less inviting: Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell.

Here there is a serious misunderstanding amongst many Christians. When we talk about the Last Things we are not talking about what comes last after everything else, like the last bus home. What we’re considering is what is most important in life; the Last Things deal with the ultimate and fundamental aspects of life rather than all the superficialities that dominate daily existence. And that, of course, means that The Last Things are in the here and now and not simply at the end of time. Through the incarnation, God in Jesus shows us how to recognise the last things in this life and thereby understand them for life eternal.

So as today is the second Sunday of Advent the two themes that fall traditionally for today are the Prophets and Judgement.

There is a synergy between these two themes that makes a great deal of sense.

The prophets – both the major ones like Isaiah and the minor ones like Amos and Micah – spent a great deal of energy prophesying the future. This doesn’t mean foretelling the future, but explaining to people what would happen if their existing behaviour continued unchecked and unreformed. In making a judgement about the present, the prophets warned people of the ultimate judgement to come; they distinguished between the superficial and the fundamental; between that which is experienced in mortal life and that which is truly real in eternity.

We all have our favourite prophets of course and the poetry of Isaiah, some of which we’ve heard this morning is hard to improve upon. The wonderful vision of creation in unity and at peace with itself is rooted in justice for the poor and downtrodden, and defeat for God’s enemies is achieved through the Word of God alone, not military force. It is a wonderful vision that offers so much promise and hope.

The prophet we heard from in our gospel reading was renowned for being less poetic and more direct. John the Baptist loses no time in declaring to the religiously devout ‘You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath of come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance.’

We live in an age where judgement is most needed – we need prophets to speak truth to power and turn around our rapid decline into half-truths and worse.

But here there is something of a warning. For if judging others is easy, then so is being judged. The tripwire of hypocrisy is never far from any of us.

At this point understanding judgement from a New Testament perspective is important. Out goes the notion of God as an external judge and jury, to be replaced by Jesus, God the Creator present in the world, and later, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, God the Creator always present in our lives. This turns judgement from being an external final moment of assessment as portrayed in the Old Testament, into a daily, living interaction between God and us, as portrayed in the ministry of Jesus.

Through the incarnation we come face to face with the judgement of God every time we come face to face with Christ in the world. This is what happened to the prodigal son who in those wonderful words “came to his senses” before returning home to his father; he came before the judgement seat of Christ and was changed. It is what happens every time any of us is moved to change our behaviour or our attitudes in the light of the Christ moving within us.

So there is much wisdom in John the Baptist’s call to ‘bear fruit worthy of repentance’.

Bearing fruit, of course, marks the end of a journey, and not the beginning. And before we can bear fruit with any consistency, we need to prepare the ground, sow the seeds, nurture the growth and take care of the tree.

This process applies to us all, however young or old; however experienced or naïve in the faith.

And just like the gardener will discover methods that work year in and year out, the true gardener will also experiment, take risks, innovate.

Which brings us neatly back to God’s great innovation in sending his son, Jesus, to reveal not only the nature of God in Him but the nature of God in us too.

And perhaps this is one fundamental truth – one judgement – about which we are most shy, most coy. For if God truly resides in us, what might we be able to achieve in His name?

Amen.