

1ST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

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Photograph by Carolyn Wheeler

READ: ISAIAH 64:1-9

"O that you would
tear open the heavens
and come down..."

REFLECT:

Happy New Year! This week Advent (the start of a new Church year) begins, and the powerful language and imagery of this reading from Isaiah makes for a dramatic opening. These 9 verses seem to hold within them all of the big themes of Advent: waiting and longing, repentance and preparation, remembering and hope.

In previous years the season of Advent has felt deeply counter-cultural. In the world beyond the Church it usually seems like Christmas has well and truly arrived by 1st December. But in 2020 things are a bit different. Everyone is waiting. Everyone is longing for things to change for the better. Everyone is trying to do the right things, to obey the rules, in the hope that this will hasten

the end of our suffering. Everyone is remembering with nostalgia the way things used to be, in the good times we took for granted. Everyone is hoping for salvation to arrive.

Many of us might expect that salvation to appear in the form of a vaccine (maybe one developed right here in Oxford! Whoop whoop!!). The prophet Isaiah was angling for the sky to break open and the mountains to tremble and the nation to see something spectacular, on the scale of the parting of the Red Sea and its reunification over the heads of their enemies.

Perhaps what we can take from this Isaiah passage into our own situation is that it's right and natural to lament where we find ourselves and what we've lost. It's right and natural to question where God is in it all. It's right and natural to cry out for help, and to long for divine intervention on a grand, impressive scale.

But even the prophet Isaiah concedes that God doesn't always work that way. Sometimes it's more as if God's working on and through us, rather than on our behalf. As if we're clay, being shaped and formed by a potter's strong, skillful, gentle hands.

And sometimes, when God finally does show up, it's no more impressive and no less wondrous than in the form of a helpless baby.

CONNECT:

This week, some big questions for us to ponder:

- What is God's relationship with creation? Present or absent? Distant or involved?
- Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote the following words from a Nazi concentration camp: "God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us." What do you think about this? If this is true, what does it mean for our hopes and expectations, our prayers and our pleas?

PRAY:

Sing out the ancient words of this great advent hymn (O come, O come, Immanuel), or speak them as a prayer:

O come, thou Wisdom from above / who ord'rest all things through thy love; / to us the path of knowledge show / and teach us in her ways to go.

O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer / our spirits by thine advent here; / disperse the gloomy clouds of night / and death's dark shadows put to flight.

RESOURCES:

Our friends at Wheatley URC have a huge archive of online sermons you can listen to, and are regularly posting new resources on their website:
www.wheatleyurc.org.uk

SUPPORT:

Pauline and myself, and your elders, are here for you if you need someone to talk to, have a prayer request, or just fancy a chat! Ping us an email or give us a ring.