

## Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> November 2022: Advent 1: 'The Hope Of All Nations' (Isaiah 2:1-5)

Hands up at home if you've got your Christmas lights up already? I know you can't see me and I can't see you, but, ever since the Covid pandemic started, I've known a lot of people putting their lights up earlier and earlier. We need things to lift our spirits. If the shops can put their Christmas stock into stores in the first week of October, why can't we put our Christmas lights up in mid-November? To be honest, we probably would as well, if we could be sure the puppy wouldn't eat them, or drag them into a corner and destroy them.

In days gone by, such things as putting the lights up early would have been frowned upon. Advent is all about waiting, about delayed gratification. But the older I've got, the more I realise that, actually, things like Christmas lights function as creative ways to enhance this season of waiting. They make us expectant – and if you're a follower of Jesus, you're expectant for more than just presents and several days of indigestion; you're waiting for the promised Saviour, the hope of all nations. If lights help you to wait with more hope and joy for the coming King, then in the concluding words of Ebenezer Scrooge in a Christmas Carol: 'I say God bless it!'

Advent every year offers us four weeks to prepare for the birth of Christ, and over these four weeks we look different people or themes that point us towards this defining moment for humanity. In the traditional church calendar, the four weeks of Advent focus on four heralds of Jesus' arrival: the Patriarchs, the Prophets, John the Baptist and Mary. More recently, these have simplified into the themes of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. This year, we're more or less combining the two – meaning that in this first week our theme is 'the hope of all nations'.

Our passage from Isaiah was written in a time of national turmoil. The nation of Israel was divided, and the Southern kingdom of Judah was surrounded by hostile, more powerful nations and empires. Worst of all, the people had strayed from obedience to their God, thereby forfeiting His automatic protection. Much of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah are hard-hitting, excoriating the people for their spiritual apathy and rebellious hearts. But, **in the midst of these passages of judgement, we find precious jewels: promises of hope and restoration.**

Isaiah 2 is just such a passage. It's often read at Remembrance, but this year, it's the set Old Testament reading for the First Sunday of Advent. And what it prophesies is the eventual victory and reign of God over the whole of creation. This reign will bring both justice and peace: 'He will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into ploughshares.' (v4)

Most radically, though, what it also promises is that 'all nations will stream' (v2) into this glorious new kingdom of God. Although God chose a particular people, the point of this choice was always that this people would be a light to the nations. **The plan all along was that the good news of God would be global.**

This is clear when we go all the way back to Abraham in the 12th chapter of the bible – Genesis 12: 'The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing...."' (Gen 12:1-2)

So far, so good. A promise for Abraham and his family and descendants, which the people of Isaiah's day would recognise. They were the heirs of this promise – but it doesn't end there: "...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Gen 12:3)

Hang on – *all* peoples? Not just us? **God's vision was always bigger. Hope was not just for insiders – but for everyone.** And Isaiah more than any other prophet saw this, and spoke this. God's visions and inspirations to Isaiah repeatedly remind the people that some day, Someone was coming who would reach out to the whole world. Abraham the patriarch was the herald of hope not just for one family or one nation – but for all families, all nations: 'All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'

And so **Isaiah's message recalls this promise to Abraham:** 'In the last days... all nations will stream to [the mountain of the Lord],' he promises. This future day would offer the blessing promised to Abraham to everyone. This future day came to pass in a stable in Bethlehem 700 years later, when shepherds and astrologers, Jews and Persians, rich and poor worshipped the new-born King.

So today, on this first Sunday of Advent, we're called to wait in hope for the promised Saviour – a hope not just for us but for everyone. And even today, in our jaded secular culture, Christmas is one of the few moments left when most of the nation connects with something of the Christian story. And much as we might moan about the commercialisation of it all – with some justification – if that's the price we pay to offer just a glimmer of the hope of the gospel, the hope for all people, then maybe it's a price worth paying. However bad the wrapping is, the gift is just as glorious as ever.

And it's worth remembering that the mixed Christian/secular heritage of Christmas is nothing new – it goes back 1,700 years. The early missionaries Christianised the pagan winter gift-giving festival precisely to offer the hope of Christ to everyone – to point the nations towards the greatest gift of all. That has its disadvantages – but when I read Isaiah chapter 2 I have to admit, maybe it wasn't such a bad call after all.

And so we pray this year, as we do every year that: 'Many peoples will come and say: "Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob."' (v3) And as that happens, so we also pray that Jesus Christ, the hope of all nations, God-become-flesh, would be real to them, and to us – that something of his love, peace and joy would touch their hearts – and ours.

So as we begin our Advent journey again this year, may we hear again the encouragement of the prophet (v5): 'Come, people of God, let us walk in the light of the Lord.' Amen.