

**SERMON: 8 December 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

**“Advent - The Light of the Kingdom of God”  
(Isaiah 11:1-9 and Matthew 3:1-12)**

[SLIDE] For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord  
as the waters cover the sea.  
(Isaiah 11:9b)

What a beautiful idea. The earth full of knowing the Lord. We're not quite there yet are we? But that's where we're headed. Or maybe its better to say, that's what's coming, that's what we're discovering together, as we journey on with this gift of life that we've been given.

Advent reminds us to wait for the coming of the Lord and God's kingdom. Sometimes that waiting is as simple as an intake of breath.

I was thinking about this verse earlier this week. And I was sitting looking out of the window and had a sudden sense that God was all around. The sun was shining. The birds were singing. The plants in the garden were resting. There was no wind. Everything was still, even though I could hear voices out in the corridor next to the room where I was sitting.

At times like that, its easy to believe that everything is going to be all right. That the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

I suppose what I'm saying is that the kingdom is only ever a breath away. The Lord is as near to us as our next breath.

(Practise - Your kingdom come on the intake breath and your will be done breathing out.)

We might be separated by nearly 3,000 years but that glimpse of the peaceful kingdom, seen by Isaiah the Prophet, rings true for us today as it must have done then.

Isaiah glimpsed the light of this new kingdom as proceeding from the descendent of David, the root of Jesse, the anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ, the coming together of matter and Spirit, flesh and Spirit, Word made flesh.

[SLIDE] Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot  
(Isaiah 11:1)

What was thought to be dead and utterly cut down, would bear new life.

God specialises in bringing new life from old and in bearing fruit from the old and cut down. We see it every winter in creation, where plants are cut back in the winter only to produce new growth and fruit the next summer.

Out of the stump will grow a shoot. What an amazing image of hope. Hope that one day the earth will indeed be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

[SLIDE] The writer and mum of 7, Ann Voskamp says that Advent is the time when we “prepare the way for the light of Christ in a world dying for light...participating in the work of the Kingdom of God.” She goes on to describe the kingdom like this:

“The words of Jesus speak of a new kingdom. A kingdom where the poor are first and the peacemakers are blessed. Where the broken hearted are comforted and the prisoner released.

A kingdom where love is central and lives lived for others, key.

A kingdom of mustard seeds, lost lambs, daily bread, prodigal children, running fathers, farmers, pearls and hidden treasure.

A kingdom of light-bearers, believing that the darkness will not overwhelm.

A kingdom of “...lovers and givers and gifters; ...advocates, servers, foot-washers and cup-of-cold-water bringers...justice warriors and peacemakers and light-igniters...”

The more people live like this the more the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. When this kingdom comes the earth is transformed, lives are transformed, people are transformed.

John the baptist had a particular role to play in preparing the way for the Lord and his kingdom to come. John was the herald. He went before the one coming, announcing his arrival, encouraging people to get their homes in order and be ready for the long expected one, who would be coming soon.

John knew he himself was not the One but he pointed to the One. He made himself smaller so that the One might be made bigger. He considered himself less important that the One might be seen as the important One. Everything had to point to the One coming. That was his reason for being.

[SLIDE] And when he comes he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matthew 3:11).

And with fire. I don't think those three words, and with fire, are an add on that describes a separate event from the presence of the Holy Spirit. Rather I think 'and with fire' helps to describe the transforming action of the Holy Spirit in a person's life.

Advent anticipates Christmas and the Incarnation of God with us in human form in the person of Jesus the Anointed One (the Messiah, the Christ). Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. Mary was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit.

And in all of them the action was like a fire at work within them. Or a great Light that no darkness could ever extinguish.

I read something this week about darkness. It was written by Sister Joan Chittister, an American Benedictine nun. It said this:

"There is a light in us that only darkness itself can illuminate. It is the glowing calm that comes over us when we finally surrender to the ultimate truth of creation: that there is a God and we are not it. . . . Then the clarity of it all is startling. Life is not about us; we are about the project of finding Life. At that moment, spiritual vision illuminates all the rest of life. And it is that light that shines in darkness.

Only the experience of our own darkness gives us the light we need to be of help to others whose journey into the dark spots of life is only just beginning."  
(DM 4/12/19)

And I don't know about you, but I've found that to be true in my own life. I've spoken before about the person I found myself working beside when I was searching for greater meaning in life in my 20's. She very openly shared her story of her own darkness and the light she discovered through it, something she described as a fire burning within her that was transforming her whole life.

She helped me see what it might mean to be baptised with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

And I've ever since found to be true also that there is that light in us that only darkness itself can illuminate. Whether that has been grief or depression or anxiety, these things, though appearing to be completely devoid of light, have been found to be only hiding that light momentarily. The Light has been there all along, though it has often needed a friend, who'd experienced their own darkness before, to lend some help to rediscover it.

And as I was reminded earlier this week sitting by that window, the fire can suddenly and unexpectedly come upon us or rise up from within us. We can

suddenly become aware of the presence of the Light in the ordinary activities of everyday life.

Is that what Jesus meant about the kingdom's coming being sudden and unexpected? And that we can make ourselves ready by watching? By looking?

And if the awareness of the Light can come so suddenly, this means that situations can change and will change. If you're stuck in a dark place you won't always be in that dark place. Things can change quickly and unexpectedly.

The Incarnation of God with us in Jesus Immanuel is God's insistence that the light of Christ and the kingdom of God will prevail. We're called to live with the presence of the same light that lit up Jesus' life. And to live in the same Spirit that defends the poor and the exploited; that doesn't judge by appearance but delights in obeying the Lord in fairness and truth (Isaiah 11:4-5). And that same Spirit will bear the fruit of love, joy, peace, and all the rest.

So whereabouts today might we prepare for the light of Christ to shine so that the earth might move that little bit closer to being filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea?

We can't guarantee that we'll be able to control the light, switching on and off to suit, but if we put ourselves on the road, in the way, in that dark situation or difficulty, in that tricky relationship, or wherever we feel called to go, then we might just discover the Light that's always been with us, will suddenly and unexpectedly illuminate a little bit more of this world.