

## **'Joy to the World' (Advent 1)**

### **How then can we be saved? (Isaiah 64:1-9)**

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#### **The rush of Christmas fog**

Well today is the first Sunday of Advent and this year our Advent sermon series is called 'Joy to the World!'.

In Dalby so far this year we've had prolonged drought, bushfires, flash flooding, COVID-19, and now we're in the middle of an apocalyptic heatwave so I think it's fair to say that we could all do with a bit of joy. Speaking of joy, with all the set-backs of 2020 it seems to me like there's a bit of a fog around Christmas this year. We're emotionally tired and we're so keen to make it into 2021 in the hope that next year will be better that it almost seems like we're trying to fit all the things we didn't get to do in 2020 into two months. There's a fog of tension around what we can and can't do this Christmas and all our plans are made in the knowledge that one outbreak could change everything an instant.

So for me it's a huge relief that we have Advent. The word advent means 'arrival'. The advent of a new iPhone means that the new phone is being released, or the advent of summer means summer is finally here. In advent we prepare to remember and celebrate Jesus' first coming 2000 years ago, but we also look forward to his second coming. As Christians we live in the now and not yet of knowing that Jesus has died for our sins, risen from the dead, and one day soon he's coming again. We live in the in-between time. Between the first advent and the second. So in this series we're going to be looking at what the Bible, particularly the book of Isaiah, says about Jesus' first coming, his return, and how we are to live in this in-between space. This Advent I'm praying that we can leave the Christmas fog behind and dive into the wonder of living in anticipation of the return, the advent, of King Jesus.

So let's jump into Isaiah 64:1 where we read:

*"Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,  
that the mountains would tremble before you!"*

#### **Remember who you follow**

Here Isaiah speaks in the voice of returned Jewish exiles. They didn't heed God's warnings earlier in Isaiah to repent and turn back to God, so the Assyrians came from North and took the people away into exile. After a few generations in exile the people cry out to God and God raises up

King Cyrus of Persia who lets the exiles return to Jerusalem where they find God's city of peace – Jerusalem – in rubble.

And so they cry out to God for an advent. They want God to arrive among them like he did before. They remind him of his works in v.2:

*For when you did awesome things that we did not expect,  
you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.  
4 Since ancient times no one has heard,  
no ear has perceived,  
no eye has seen any God besides you,  
who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.*

The returned exiles, children of the people who had rejected the God of Israel, are beginning to wake up and remind themselves of the God they follow. He's the God who tore the heavens apart at Mt Sinai and spoke to the people, he's the God who shook the earth and brought down the walls of Jericho, he's the God who rained down fire on Elijah's altar at Mt Carmel.

The returned exiles have heard the stories and they want God to act for them again. They wait for God to respond. They sit in the rubble of Jerusalem begging God to come among them. They've heard the stories, but they haven't experienced them yet.

Friends perhaps you've felt like this too. Perhaps you've heard about God splitting the oceans, speaking from heaven, and coming in fire and you think, well God if you used to do those things, why not now? Can I suggest that this is a very good way to live your life? Many of us have given up on God ever acting and even Christians become functional atheists day to day. We pray on Sunday that God would intervene in our circumstances but don't truly expect God to act.

Advent is a time when we can recover the wonder of worshipping an interventionist God. Nick Cave famously sang "I don't believe in an interventionist God, but darling I know you do". We do too. So let's pray big prayers. Lots of people tell me about the times when this church was packed every Sunday and we had a billion kids in kids church, why aren't we praying that God would do that again. It's a joy to welcome Bruce and Libby to church today and it's a reminder that God has raised up missionaries to go and preach the gospel overseas. But are we praying that God would do that again? Are we praying that God would raise up

missionaries today? Let's pray big prayers remembering that we're praying to a God who acts on behalf of his people.

**Remember who you are  
(a sinner saved by grace)**

As the people pray that God would act and remember his works and character, they are reminded of who they are. Read with me v.5:

*You come to the help of those who gladly do right,  
who remember your ways.  
But when we continued to sin against them,  
you were angry.  
How then can we be saved?*

Here is a moment of honesty from the people. They realise that they don't deserve God's blessings. They remember that they and their ancestors have rejected the Lord again and again. They confess that they don't deserve God's love, instead they deserve his anger.

And then they cry out with the deep existential question we all ask ourselves at some point in our lives: *How then can we be saved?*

It's a moment of honesty and humility that floors the people as they hold up a mirror to their souls. They see themselves as a holy God sees them and they don't like what they see.

Verse 6 is disgusting and it's meant to be that way:

*<sup>6</sup>All of us have become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;  
we all shrivel up like a leaf,  
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.*

The word translated 'filthy rags' here describes a menstrual rag. It's saying basically that we're so lost even our good deeds are like used tampons before God. Now why would anyone say such a thing? Well, it all has to do with motive.

Here the people are confessing that even when they do the right thing, they're doing it for the wrong reasons. Like a cheating husband who buys their wife presents to distract them from their unfaithfulness, or a

colleague who holds the door for you and then expects a big favour in return. However, God won't be bribed. I often hear the line, '*Well so and so doesn't come to church but they're a good person*', as if God doesn't care if we ignore him, so long as we pay our taxes and mind our p's and q's. Here the people of Israel are having a good look at themselves and they realise they're dirty before God. Their sins are sweeping them away.

v.7 finishes with this lament:

*No one calls on your name  
or strives to lay hold of you;  
for you have hidden your face from us  
and have given us over to our sins."*

The people feel a million miles away from God and it feels like God has turned away from them and left them to their own devices. Can you feel the heartache and hurt?

Friends, this is another aspect of Advent which is such a blessing for us. While many try to numb the pain of life coming up to Christmas, eating, drinking, and shopping our worries away, Advent draws us into confession. A recognition that God is good, just, and holy, and we, if we're honest, are not. We need a saviour to help us; we need a God who saves.

### **Remember God saves**

And this is the next stanza as confession leads to praise:

*Yet you, LORD, are our Father.  
We are the clay, you are the potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.  
<sup>9</sup> Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD;  
do not remember our sins forever.  
Oh, look on us, we pray,  
for we are all your people.*

Here is one of the few instances in the Old Testament where God is called Father. Considering how raw verse 6 is it's incredible that the people use such an intimate word. The people are remembering that God is like a loving Father, a father who cares enough to discipline their children, but also to shield them from danger.

It's a wretched cry for mercy but you and I have the gift of hindsight and so we know God's response. We know that God does rend the heavens, that God does come down in person.

Jesus is God's answer to the cry in v.5 'How then can we be saved'. Jesus did the awesome things the people ask for in v.3 and he shows us how far God is willing to go in order to act on behalf of his people in v.4. Jesus is why Christians believe in an interventionist God. Jesus is the reason we pray big prayers.

On the day Jesus died, the skies turned black, the curtain in the temple that protected God's people from his anger was torn in two, and God revealed to the nations his forgiveness plan. On the morning Jesus rose God the earth shook, and the mountains trembled as Jesus rose from the tomb. The people crying out to God in Isaiah would have to wait many year for their saviour to come but it was well worth the wait. We worship a God who not only cares about good and evil, but we worship a God who also saves.

### **Remember the hope (You are the potter, we are the clay)**

And so how are we meant to live in the presence of this God who loves us to death? Well, we are to remember the hope. Here Isaiah gives us the beautiful and vivid picture of how we are called to live:

v.8 again:

*you, LORD, are our Father.*

*We are the clay, you are the potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.*

Friends, Advent is a time to remind ourselves that we need to be malleable and open to God. God is an artist and like a potter who has plans for their clay, God wants to fashion and shape us into the people he created us to be. In the rush and fog leading up to Christmas we have the opportunity to say:

'God how would you like to shape me today? How are you going to smooth my rough edges, and shape me so I can live for you? Are you calling me to serve you overseas like Bruce and Libby or are you calling me to share the gospel with my neighbours next door?

Friends this Advent don't pass on the opportunity to let God shape you, mould you, and help you grow. While there is breath in your lungs God isn't finished with you. Spend time praying big prayers this Advent, ask God to forgive you and repent of the things that have kept you from God this year, and remember that God is a loving Father ready to shape you mould you and help you thrive. We can do all of these things because the gift of Jesus shows us that there is always the hope of God's promise for us. Let's pray to him now.