

The Day of the Lord
Isaiah 2:1-5, Matthew 24:36-44

27 November 2016

There is a large sculpture within the United Nations Headquarters in New York City by the Soviet artist Evgeniy Vuchetich depicting a powerful male figure hammering at a huge sword with an equally huge mallet. The statue is entitled: *Let us beat swords into ploughshares*. In the wake of two World Wars and at the height of the Cold War this most telling artistic expression of the human yearning for peace and a productive life was positioned right at the centre of world affairs and it was based on the two and a half thousand years old vision of an ancient Hebrew prophet, the prophet Isaiah. How is it that this vision, this picture endured for so long?

The introduction to the passage we have just heard from the OT says: 'This is the message which Isaiah son of Amoz received in a vision about Judah and Jerusalem'. But a more accurate translation goes like this: 'The *word* that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem'. The prophet does not simply hear the word, as most of us do, he actually sees it; an intriguing connection between words and images. One that we have been reflecting on at our Bible Teaching Day in October and one that we are exploring again this year during our Advent preparations. Hence our Advent leaflet you received this morning and the picture on the wall.

So, what is this connection? The obvious answer would be that images can illustrate words. But there is more to it than that, because here we are not talking about ordinary words, we are talking about the 'word of God'. The image Isaiah sees is not something resembling, or explaining the word of God – it IS the word of God. The word of that God who said 'let there be light' and 'there was light'. The God who said 'let us make human beings in our image' and you and I came about. The God, whose words, once issued, will not return empty without accomplishing God's purpose and succeeding in the task God sent it. (Isaiah 55:11) In today's parlance we would say God's word is interactive.

The word Isaiah sees concerns the future; the future of the people of God seen in the context of what God has in mind for them, often referred to as the Day of the Lord. The concept of the Day of the Lord was deeply engraved on the consciousness of Israel. There

was more than one meaning to it. On the very first pages of the Hebrew Bible it appears as the seventh day of Creation, when God rested from the work of Creation and made the day holy. Later, after the escape from Egypt, when the Israelites received the Ten Commandments, they were again reminded of the seventh day, the day of the Lord, God's holy Sabbath and were instructed to keep it holy. During the ensuing turbulent history of God's people the day of the Lord acquired another meaning as it now referred to a future time, when all the suffering, injustice, sin and guilt would be dealt with and put right. As to its nature, it was seen in different ways by different prophets.

According to the prophet Amos simply counting on all the benefits of the Day of the Lord wouldn't do. Those with complacent expectations may be wrong-footed, for them the day of the Lord would only mean darkness not light (Amos 5:18); it would be like 'someone running from a lion, only to be confronted by a bear' – another telling image that speaks volumes. But the word Isaiah saw showed up as swords being beaten into ploughshares signifying the approach of God's Peaceable rule, when there would be no more wars and nations would find other ways of resolving their differences. Isn't this something we still long for now, at the beginning of the 21st century? And isn't this the same longing, which was behind the setting up of the United Nations in 1945?

A couple of weeks ago we had the lectionary reading from Luke's Gospel entitled 'Warnings about the end' and we learnt how the subject belonged to the so-called apocalyptic literature, envisaging, as the title indicates, the end times. Today we have the good fortune of having Matthew's version of it. As our Advent leaflet says, today is the beginning of a period of looking forward to celebrating the past event of Jesus' coming as an ordinary baby. Once the tradition of marking the Advent season had been established in the Church, which surprisingly was not until the end of the 6th century AD, it was always designated as a preparation for both the first and the second coming of Christ. So as today we begin a new liturgical year, we also begin a time of preparation.

On the whole we know how to prepare for Christmas. As Christians we believe that in Jesus we have received God's greatest gift of self-giving, sacrificial love, and therefore our preparations would involve acts of loving and giving. And we would respect and

honour any signs of selfless loving and giving wherever we find them, inside or outside of the church knowing that it is rooted in God.

But, how do we wait for, how do we prepare for Christ's second coming? Do we, in fact believe in Christ's second coming in those dramatic, apocalyptic terms we find in the Bible? It is certainly not something that's easy to contemplate when more than 2000 years have passed and in spite of some unfulfilled predictions the world still has not come to an end. There are those who cynically think that we do not really need God to bring the Earth to an end, we, ourselves are doing a pretty good job of it with our incessant wars, nuclear proliferation and in the way we contribute to a massive environmental disaster. It may be the other way round now: It's as if we needed God to step in to prevent the world from coming to a premature end. But, of course, it is all speculation, because no one really knows about the end, not even the Son – according to Jesus. And that's the worst of it, the not knowing. As one commentator says, not knowing forces us to face our vulnerability just as Jesus had to face his own vulnerability, as it is well illustrated in the Gospels.

So, as we anxiously wait, perhaps not for the end of the world, but certainly for our own personal ends, what encouragement is offered to us? One thing that comes out of both our Biblical passages today is that the future and the end, however we imagine it, belongs to God. At this waiting time of Advent, when we are so busy with all the practical preparations concerning ourselves and those we love, we are urged to lift up our eyes beyond those concerns and *see the word of God*. Let us do it now in a literal sense and look up at William Holman Hunt's well-known picture *The Light of the World*. Talking about his painting the artist has revealed something of the creative process that produced his work and it echoed some of the things we have just discovered about the interactive nature of the Word of God. Holman Hunt said that he painted this picture not simply because it was a good subject, but in a kind of obedience to, what he thought was an inner compulsion, a 'divine command'.

What makes this a real Advent picture is the kind of questions it poses for our consideration. The artist lifted the image from the Book of Revelation, where it was surrounded by harsh apocalyptic scenes of punishment and suffering. And with a few well-placed brush strokes, he subverted the gloom and doom and struck

a dominant note of hope and encouragement, while at the same time he left room in a subtle way for self-criticism.

Who is waiting here, you or God? What is this God like? Like the stern, finger-wagging God that Marcus Borg talks about as he remembers the God of his childhood, or is it a Jesus-shaped God, to borrow a lovely expression from Bill Loader, our favourite Australian preacher? When is he coming, some time in the future, or has he been there all the time without being noticed? What is he bringing, judgement, or a gentle light, just enough to show the next step to be taken in the company of Jesus? How is he coming, with thunder from the sky, or with a quiet discreet knock? What stands in his way? Is it the impossibly high standards we think he expects, or a man-made heavy, solid door bolted on the inside and overgrown on the outside with forbidding, thorny, thistle-like weeds, a door not used for a long-long time.

We always notice the fact that Christ can not enter by reason of a missing door handle, but perhaps today we can give a thought to the person/family/church/nation, who might be on the other side of that door. They seem to be self-contained, they think they don't need anybody for anything; they have not stepped out of their 'comfort-zone', they call home for a good while now, at least for a year judging by the vegetation. For, who knows what dangers lurk beyond that door? Surely, the future is full of risks and pitfalls and anyway, there is no more room in the inside, we are already crowded as we are.

So the most important question this picture raises, summarising all the others is this: are we living in fear or in hope? Fear divides us from each other and from God. Hope is willing to watch out for the still, small voice and even in the crowded well-meaning busyness of life will hear the discreet knock and is prepared to risk living as if the One who was to come, had already come. As, in fact, he has. Our picture encourages us to enter into the Advent spirit with hope. God has spoken and we have seen his Word. God is still speaking and we are called to see and enact God's word for today.

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