

Sermon text 6 December 2020

May I speak in the name of the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

During Advent, I hope you all feel very sorry for any singer who has to do any reading from Isaiah, especially a reading like the one we heard this morning. Memories of Handel's *Messiah* are so present that it's hard not to sing.

This season is more memory-stirring than any other. Advent is a time of intense longing and solemn preparation, a bit like Lent; but in Advent, we are waiting not for a triumphant resurrection, but the arrival of a tiny baby. It's no wonder people who come to church only once a year come now, longing for a connection to the past, to something ancient and remembered. But even if this is your first Advent, you will catch this sense of longing -- from the music, from the readings, from the general atmosphere. Experiencing this season is a bit like falling in love: there is a sense of strong recognition. hearing that God loved us so much that he came and met us in human form, we can feel that we've known this, and needed this, all along.

Isaiah's prophecy and Mark's Gospel are two texts that gaze at each other in recognition. Isaiah foretells the coming Messiah, and the writer of Mark's gospel quotes related Old Testament prophecies from Exodus and Malachi to reinforce his account, echoing words from Isaiah in verse 2.

If you believe that all scripture is related to itself, that it is the inspired and living word of God, then the connections between these two texts become even more fruitful. Isaiah is not simply a prophecy stuck in its own time; when we put it alongside this gospel account, for example, it feels as though it's coming alive, like a living dialogue partner, and the more we look at them side by side, the more they inform each other.

Memory is, above all, a process of looking. Looking again and again. And this process applies to many things we do as humans. Even who we are, our personal identities, rely very heavily on memory: looking back countless times, over the course of our lives, to remember, and thus discover, who we are and who we will be. Artists and musicians obviously rely on memory, too. I'd like to share a very small story, not about memorising music, but something visual. The great painter Robbie Wraith once told me that his training in how to draw involved being made to sketch a 3D object many many times, each time turning the object ever so slightly so that by the time he had drawn it from all angles, he had truly memorised, and thus understood, every detail of its shape.

Our relationship with scripture could be something like this, if we give it the time. If I can throw out an Advent challenge for you today, it's worth looking at the gospel texts for each Sunday, not just once, but many times during the week, on different days. Hold them up to the light like stained glass; turn them and look at them from all angles. See if the way you read them one day is different from the next. And, crucially, put them in dialogue with other things: with a painting, or another piece of scripture, or a piece of music. See if you can get them to come alive differently each time. The Visual Commentary on Scripture is an astonishing resource to look at: it's found at thevcs.org, and it's an ongoing project that pairs passages of scripture with three paintings and a commentary.

We've just heard the first eight verses of Mark's gospel, which is the shortest of the four New Testament accounts of Jesus' life. You'll notice that there's no nativity story: no Herod or wise men or shepherds, and no genealogy. Instead we have John the Baptist, who is quite a miserable figure, actually, with his hair shirt -- crying out in the wilderness, as we are crying out in this bleak near-midwinter of Advent: "Prepare the way of the Lord!" And just four verses later, we have the beginning of Jesus' public ministry as an adult. This account begins much further along in the story of his life than Luke's or Matthew's gospel, which start with the Christmas story as we know it: the birth of Jesus.

But let's take a moment to compare these three with the fourth one, John's gospel, which actually at the beginning of the world. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God."

If we are to understand ourselves as made in God's image, then I think we might do well to look away from Adam and Eve, and towards Jesus as the Word Incarnate. Jesus is the form in which God chose to meet us as himself: the Christ, the Word, God's true self, showing us who we are.

The Anglican Communion is currently marking 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, central to its message is this idea that men and women are made in God's image. "We are God's daughters and sons", they write, "equally precious, equally loved." Ending violence is therefore the work of all God's children, for all of God's children.

If we then return to this idea of the Word Incarnate as the image of God that we should focus on, what does the word "Word" say to us? It's very suggestive, isn't it, that there is a relationship between God and language.

We have two "words": Jesus as the Word Incarnate, and the Scriptures as the word of God. And we can dwell in these scriptures just as Jesus dwells in God, finding connections to the scriptures not only in reading the bible, but in the sacraments, the creeds, and our prayers. And in the scriptures, especially during Advent, we have the chance to engage our memories by returning again and again, and using those texts to anticipate the coming of God as he makes himself known to us as the Word Incarnate.

So let us practise dwelling richly in God as the prophets did, immersing ourselves in the memories of our lives and of our faith, the memories of Advents past; the imaginings of Advents yet to come; because the prophets looked forward, not just back. Let's engage with God's word as we await the Word made flesh, travelling closer and closer to that starlit night in Bethlehem, when the word made flesh will come gently, like a poem, to dwell with us.

Amen.