

Sunday 4 December 2016

Second Sunday in Advent, St Mary's Church

Isaiah 11.1-10; Romans 15.4-13; Matthew 3.1-12.

Encountering holiness – what are we going to do about it?

Someone once said that being able to hold two contradictory ideas in your mind at the same time is a sign of intelligence.

Well, perhaps. Or perhaps it just leads to indecision - 'analysis paralysis' as they call it.

So perhaps it's correct, but perhaps not. I can see both sides of the argument, but I can't decide.

And so much for intelligence tests.

But as I was preparing for this sermon, it occurred to me that Advent is a time when we are meant to be doing exactly that. We're meant to be holding two different images of Jesus in our mind. And what's more, they are two images that seem to be at utterly at odds with one another.

The first image, of course, is the image of the baby Jesus, born into this world poor, fragile, helpless, completely dependent on his parents and the kindness of strangers. It is the image of God incarnate in His world, offering Himself to us completely, without any self-protection. This is the image that dominates at this time of year, the one we rightly celebrate with joy at Christmas.

But what about the second image? It is the image of Jesus as judge, separating the wheat from the chaff and casting the chaff into unquenchable fire.

It's an image that should be sobering, if not downright scary.

How are we meant to hold these two images together and make sense of them? The gentle and helpless child born into the world to save it, and the judge who comes with a winnowing fork to clear his threshing floor. It possible that two such opposing images can both be true? And if so, what does that mean for us as followers of Christ?

The answer, I believe, is this. Both images are true and they make perfect sense if we remember this one fundamental thing about Jesus. He demands a response from us.

When we meet God in Jesus, we meet holiness, and when we meet holiness it is like a searchlight is thrown onto our innermost state. We see ourselves for what we are.

Who can forget the response of the prophet Isaiah when he saw the Lord:

'Woe to me!' he cried. 'I am ruined. For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.' [Is 6.5].

And as soon as we see ourselves for what we are, we have to make a choice.

Jesus is born into the world as a helpless child: and his birth is a challenge -this is what holiness looks like - how are you going to respond?

He spends His earthly life healing and teaching and performing miracles, and everything He does is a challenge – this is what holiness looks like - how are you going to respond?

He dies on a cross and his suffering and death are a challenge – this is what holiness looks like - how are you going to respond?

Then He rises from the dead and his resurrection is a challenge – this is what holiness looks like - how are you going to respond?

How are we to respond?

In the age-old Jewish fashion, let me answer a question with another question.

What is the one thing that each of us possesses that God cannot or will not take away from us?

Think about it for a second. Is it life? Obviously not – any one of us might die in the next minute. Is it our mind, our rational thought? Well, the tiniest capillary bursting in our brain would destroy our mind. Our money? Our careers? Our loved ones? Peace and security? Law and order?

Every single one of those things is ephemeral. My friends, we possess nothing. Everything we think we have can be lost in a heartbeat.

Except for this one thing.

And that thing is *your right to yourself*. In other words, your right to put yourself at the centre of your life instead of God. God cannot, or will not, take that away from you. He will never, ever override that right.

And the choice that Jesus asks us to make whenever we come across him is this: what are we going to do with that right?

There are only two choices, and they are the choices that separate the wheat from the chaff.

The first choice is to cling to ourselves. This is the easy choice. Friends, even good people cling to themselves. We tend to see our spiritual lives as a sort of bargain between equals – God on the one hand and ourselves on the other. The bargain is that we behave well, and do good deeds, and in return, God will treat us right. We can throw God a few bones and still hang on to ourselves.

The second choice is the tough one. It is the decision to lay down our right to ourselves completely and present it as a sacrifice to God.

This is the true response to holiness, the true repentance. Not a new year's resolution to do more for charity in the hope of getting on God's good side, but a complete abandonment of the self to God.

This is a profound, fundamental shift that takes place at the very heart of our being. The best thing we can liken it to is a rebirth. At the moment we make that choice, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in us, to save us and make us into new people.

This is how we make sense of the two images: Christ the gentle child, and Christ the judge. It's not about Jesus coming along and looking at our individual balance sheets of good deeds and bad and declaring 'pass or fail'. The judgement happens automatically in the way we respond to the complete holiness that is in Him. If we respond by abandoning ourselves to Him, we receive the true life of God through the Holy Spirit - we are wheat that will be gathered into God's barn. If our response is to resist and cling to ourselves, try and save ourselves by shutting God out, or by doing good works in a sort of bargain with God, we cut ourselves off from the true life and we are like chaff, destined for oblivion.

And so at Advent, as we hold these two images together, the question we must ask ourselves is this: how will I respond to Christ?