

Who would you invite to your fantasy dinner party? You can choose up to five guests alive or dead, famous or personal. I'm not sure on all of mine but it would definitely be the late Queen, Alexander the Great, the writer of John's gospel and Moira Rose from Schitt's Creek. I'm guessing not many of us would choose the prophets Elijah, Isaiah or John the Baptist, not least because the menu would be quite limited, and I'm not convinced they were that concerned about personal hygiene, and I don't think many of us would choose Paul for fear of offending the other guests. But on this second Sunday of Advent they are very much the guests, indeed John the Baptist is the guest who doesn't know when to leave, he hangs around for next Sunday as well.

Isaiah sits upright at the table, eyes darting around, taking in the food, the layout, the guests, he's ready with his opinion in a moment. He swept onto the stage in the year that King Uzziah died. Uzziah had built Judah into a prosperous and powerful kingdom in his long reign, over 40 years, but was stricken with leprosy when he disobeyed God. When his son Jotham took over the political landscape was changing, Assyria was in the ascendancy looking to conquer both Babylon and Syria. With its tactic of overpowering small states, deporting populations and plundering cities, Assyria became the menace that filled Syria and Palestine with terror and made them make some

disastrous alliances and decisions.¹ In amongst all the political scheming and alliances Isaiah calls the nation back to God, he “cannot accept politics as a solution, since politics itself, with its arrogance and disregard of justice was a problem.”² Israel’s security lies in its covenant with God, and only in that. Isaiah speaks of a day when the righteous rule of the Son of David will usher in a new Eden, a period of peace and harmony. In this Messianic oracle we see the hope Isaiah holds out, but the people have to reexamine their old assumptions and definitions, not least about who has power and how it is used.

As an Advent text this speaks right into our context. Like the original hearers of Isaiah’s message, we are between the times. The Son of David has come in the person of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, but we have not yet seen the promised final consummation of God’s peaceable kingdom. The message is still for us, where are we putting our hope?

If we were at this imaginary dinner party this is where St Paul would put down his knife and fork, take a sip of wine and launch in. It’s basically what he’s doing in the letter to the Romans. Because he didn’t found the church there,

¹ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, p.78

² *ibid*, p.91

because he doesn't really know them that well he's not embroiled in their issues as he is with the Corinthians so he can take some time to develop his thinking.

In the passage we have this morning Paul is developing his previous argument and leading into telling us that this decision of God to unite Jews and Gentiles into one people isn't a recent thing, quoting from the OT Paul wants us to see that this has been God's plan for a chosen people from the beginning.³ And because of God's steadfastness in that plan and promise we can have hope and joy and peace in believing. But Paul is making it very clear where our hope lies. "Unless there is trust in God there can be no hope; but unless God is faithful, there can be no trust. It is therefore the faithfulness of God, demonstrated in Christ, upon which our hope is based."⁴

"The word 'hope' then becomes the key concept in the prayer of v13 which concludes the entire passage. Only the power of God, working through the Holy Spirit, can grant both Jew and Gentile joy, peace, faith, and hope. 'Hope' is the key word, a hope possible because God controls the future and has

³ Paul J Achtemeier, *Feasting on the Word: Year A volume 1*, p.43

⁴ *ibid*, p.41

given a glimpse of that future by sending Christ. Advent is thus for Christians a time of expectation and joy, of waiting and fulfilment.”⁵

But as Paul picks up his knife and fork to start eating again, Elijah puts his bread down and nudges John the Baptist who’s picking a locust out of his teeth. “Our turn,” he says. John startled into life proclaims, “you brood of vipers! Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees!” as he picks up another locust. Of all the traditional texts at Christmas it’s surprising that this one has never made it to the front of a Christmas card.

To be fair we have Matthew’s presentation of John this morning, and Matthew really, really wants us to see him as the new Elijah. So, we have the quote from Isaiah, and we have John styled in the way that his readers would have recognised the great OT prophet. And we have John railing against the Pharisees and Sadducees, probably representing the people Matthew’s community were in conflict with. And there’s a slight hint that Matthew is putting John in his place as well, he is clearly subordinate to Jesus, maybe Matthew’s community needed to hear that.

⁵ *ibid*, p.43

But whatever else John is doing, like Elijah and Isaiah and all the prophets before him, he is out of phase with his time, his message is unwelcome, uncomfortable when people just want to enjoy what they have. Like John the Baptist Advent is out of phase with our time. It is a message of expectant waiting in a world that wants everything now, it is a message of looking beyond the present in a world that wants to stay in Christmas before it's even arrived.

In all the gospels John the Baptist's preaching and baptism are oriented to the coming kingdom of God and to preparing the way of the Lord.⁶ Elijah and Isaiah echo through John and whistle around all of our prosperity and all of our power and self-sufficiency and say, 'you are looking in the wrong place.' All of our dinner guests are asking us to re-orient ourselves, as this entire season does. "Advent looks, not to the birth of a baby, but to the long-anticipated day of the Lord when the old age of Sin and Death will pass away."⁷ And it feels like our dinner guests are turning on us as one and asking that most difficult of questions, where is your hope?

⁶ Daniel Harrington, *Matthew*, p.53

⁷ Fleming Rutledge, *Advent*, p.289

John the Baptist tells the Pharisees and Sadducees not to hope in their religious lineage, being children of Abraham, because God can make anyone a child of Abraham as God does with us through Christ. Isaiah tells the Jewish leaders not to put their hope in politics and economics and alliances, because all that will fail. Paul tells us that our only hope is in God through the Holy Spirit. “Hope is the undaunted force that comes from the Holy Spirit, getting into our human spirits and drawing us beyond the darkness of today and toward the light of the new tomorrow.”⁸

John the Baptist’s message of turning around is nearly always presented in terms of repentance, which of course is necessary, but it’s also necessary to turn around, to re-orient ourselves in our hope, our hope of Jesus Christ. Not in our heritage or our traditions, not in our building or our eco credentials, not even in the plans and priorities we will be talking about after service. Our hope isn’t in them; they are just part of us living out our hope in Jesus and his coming kingdom. Our hope isn’t even in our repentance but in God’s power that gives good deeds and inner strength and spiritual discipline

⁸ Joanna M Adams, *Feasting on the Word: Year A Volume 1*, p.41

and faith and repentance. We are able to repent and bear fruit because he is coming.⁹

The prophets are always the guests at our table because their message always needs to be heard. But in their company, and in their words, we see a better feast, not just Isaiah's vision of a new Eden, but a banquet where all are welcome, where everyone has a place laid for them and where peace, love, joy and hope abound. It is that banquet, that kingdom that you and I are asked to hope for and look towards and prepare for. "Preparing the way for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ is not going to be so easy for you and me. It means laying ourselves open to God's great levelling operation. It means relinquishing our most cherished strategies and defences. It means living every day in anticipation of God's work of cutting and filling. It means being ready at all times to relinquish one's own special privileges in the world on behalf of those who might be very different from us."¹⁰

That is the call of Advent to us this morning. To allow the work of hope to seep into us and start pulling up all that would stop us hoping and living for

⁹ Rutledge, *op.cit.*, p.297

¹⁰ *ibid.* p.291

God's kingdom, all that would stop us from seeing that the baby we wait for is the coming King we still wait for. And as the table is cleared and we drain the last of our wine we are invited to get up from this feast with the taste of bread and wine: hope in our mouths, the joy of God in our hearts and the work of the kingdom in our hands.