

We've gathered, you and I, here on an Advent evening. Evening is a time for reflection as the day draws to a close. Advent is when we wait for God to come amongst us – as the baby in Bethlehem and as Christ returning at the end of time. Advent calls us to prepare our hearts to receive God, whose coming is both judgement and salvation, both critique and healing. We find both of those in our readings.

What happens when society forgets God and justice? One way to see that is to look at Isaiah's message – a set of oracles of judgement. Another way of course is to open a newspaper, read headlines online, see what clickbait the algorithms serve up to us. Isaiah speaks to a society marked by greed, exploitation, and moral decay. This is the first Isaiah, trying to tell his people they needed to change. Only they didn't, and ended up exiled from their land for decades.

Here Isaiah's naming the issues. He calls out greed and land-grabbing – those who accumulate wealth and enrich themselves at others' expense. Poor farmers have become poorer, their vineyards and fields yielding tiny crops, and God is angry on their behalf. Isaiah rails against self-indulgence, a life focused on pleasure, ignoring God – probably too drunk to notice what God's doing or realise they're headed for exile. Jerusalem will be destroyed and the proud will be humbled. Humanity is enslaved to sin, they're like an ox and sin is the cart they're dragging along.

It's clear Isaiah's society has lost its moral compass – there are those who call evil good and good evil, twisting the truth. And what's really sad is that they're all terribly self-sufficient, with a starring role in their own eyes – so much so that they've forgotten about God. God, however, can't forget about injustice – so judgement, darkness, and exile are looming on the horizon. God's going to whistle up others to come and carry off these people like so much prey. It's a disaster in the making – and we get a ringside seat.

Where do we see things like this happening today? Housing inequality, climate crisis, access to hospital treatment? That's a genuine question, because we can all look at the world (and the news) differently. Where some of us might see economic inequality, environmental exploitation, distorted values, others might call it prudent financial stewardship. But wherever we land we need to make sure we're on the side of justice as God sees it – because Isaiah reminds us God cares deeply about justice and truth.

But judgment isn't the whole story. Into this world of brokenness and warning comes a word of hope, a promise that God's purposes don't end with exile or failure. That's what we hear in Acts, where Paul speaks not of despair but of grace. Isaiah gives us a rant, Paul preaches a sermon – in a synagogue on one of his missionary journeys. It feels like he goes on for much longer than I will tonight. First he retells the story, from Israel's ancestors down to king David – David's the hero but all this is pointing to Jesus as the promised Saviour. But even after centuries of pouring over the scriptures the people didn't recognise Jesus as the fulfilment of prophecy, and so Paul's trying desperately to get them to see that Jesus' resurrection is the ultimate sign of God's faithfulness. Because then he holds out to them God's offer of

forgiveness and freedom through Christ. “By this Jesus everyone who believes is set free from all those sins.” No longer do they have to drag their sinfulness like a cart behind them.

Where Isaiah warns of judgment for turning away from God and trying to go it alone, Acts proclaims grace for those who turn to God through Christ. Isaiah’s warnings aren’t the last word – God’s promise of life and forgiveness is. Grace is stronger than judgement. But sometimes – just like Isaiah’s people – we need to hear the judgement in order to acknowledge our need for grace.

So where do we come in? How do we fit together God’s concern for justice and God’s promises of freedom, forgiveness and new life? Maybe if we come at it from another angle it might sharpen things up: where are we trying to go it alone, relying on the knowledge we think we have and the direction we want to go in? Where are we leaving God out of the picture? God doesn’t always act how we expect God to act – sometimes we’ll be like the generations who poured over the scriptures but failed to recognise God coming amongst us in Jesus. How can we go through life with the humility to see we might not have all the answers – whether it’s on economic policy, care for the environment, or how we treat our neighbours?

Advent calls us to live in hope of Christ’s coming, to live as people of light – people who know the truth about our need and the greater truth about God’s grace. So as we wait, let’s prepare with humility and courage, ready to welcome both God’s critique and God’s healing, trusting that grace will have the last word.

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