

**Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> November 2021**  
**Isaiah 9:2-7**  
**Rev.Scott Burton**  
**Brightons Parish Church**

Let us come to God in prayer. Let us pray:

Holy Spirit, be welcome here and reveal to us the heart of our Father.

Holy Spirit, be welcome here and reveal to us the hope we have through Jesus.

Come now Holy Spirit, we pray, with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus name. Amen.

So, however your Christmas preparations go, I'm not the best at organizing the Christmas shopping, someone else in my family has been busy with that over the last couple of months, whether prompted by an ensuing pregnancy and coming up in a few weeks' time or whether it's because of the news we heard about coronavirus and Brexit having this great clash of impact upon shopping, hopefully you're making a better progress because time's ticking, less than four weeks now, and I wonder if you're beginning to think, like me are, we going to get it like we normally get it or are we going back to last year where we had that one day of freedom and the frustration and the limitation of that. So, I wonder how you're approaching advent this year? But as I said in the introduction before the reading, maybe there's other things going on and how you're approaching Advent this year. That, actually, if you were to take a moment to pause and slow down and be really honest, is there something deeper going on in you or maybe in people you know, are in our wider community, and world? That though we're going through the motions and we're doing the usual habits and making the list and getting it sorted out, actually, deep down, there's deeper emotions on the go here? Maybe emotions of fear, of weariness? Maybe even of pain, pain of what the last year has brought to you in your life? And the temptation is to bury it and to ignore it, but actually, maybe we need to name it and share it. That, although the nights might be drawing in and it's getting darker earlier, there is too, in us, a darkness, a spiritual, emotional darkness that's got nothing to do with sin maybe, not our sin at least and it's the darkness that has been nurtured sadly by the impact of life on you.

In Isaiah's day, the people there were experiencing a darkness as well. Just before our passage that we read from, at the end of chapter 8 Isaiah says this of the people 'Then they will look towards the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom and they will be thrust into utter darkness.' The situation for them is not coronavirus or political tensions of a form, but political tensions with Assyria that they face. The threat of Assyria coming and conquering them and so the people are filled with a fearful gloom and whenever the future they look to, the circumstances around them, it just looks dark, it looks bleak, it is full of gloom for them. And so, what does Isaiah say to the people in their darkness? What does he say to us in our darkness?

Well, as we read 'The people walking in darkness have seen a great light on those living in the land of deep darkness. A light has dawned. For to us a child is born. To us a son is given and the government will be on his shoulders and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.' Isaiah sent with a message of hope, a message that light is coming. In fact, in Isaiah, the words are a light has come as a child is born. It's that certain. It's spoken of as if it's already happened,

even though it's still in the future. it's that certain. God is going to make sure this happens. A light is coming and it will come with the arrival of a child.

Now, maybe, the people would be thinking 'Well, who is this child? Who is this?' We know that Isaiah, his ministry stretched over a period of a number of kings and it's likely that Hezekiah was just born before this particular message. They might be wondering 'Is it Hezekiah he speaks of? Is this the child that we're to look to?' But it can't be. It can't be because the words highlighted here point to something that would be startling. 'Wonderful' it was only used in the context of the wonders that God had done, like when you and I we look up to the stars on a dark night in these winter months and we are just filled with awe at the magnitude of creation, of something that only God can do. That's the sense of Wonderful here. And no prince, no king, no human being was ever called Mighty God. In Israel to do so would be blasphemy and clearly no king, prince whoever, had ever been Everlasting, had been eternal, and so all these terms are pointing to someone who would come that seems to be divine somehow. But then Prince? Prince was a term used of human rulers and so it speaks of someone who would have human lineage and so we have this promise of someone who will come who is both divine and human.

And in the midst of giving that promise, God calls His people to wait, to wait in hope, and in faith, and they had to wait a long time. 800 years from the point of Isaiah, 400 years from the point of Malachi, who we were just looking at in the last couple of weeks. But eventually, finally, a child comes and when He grows, His life, His ministry fulfills every expectation of these verses, every expectation of every other promise given by God, and so the claim of Christianity for 2000 years has been that God fulfilled His promise. That child was born. He, the promised one, the Messiah as he would come to be known, God in human form, bringing light and life into the darkness of our world.

And so, we often read the very familiar passages in the early chapters of Matthew and Luke that tell us the Christmas story and they echo these words of Isaiah like the angel to Mary who says 'You will conceive and give birth to a son and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His kingdom will never end.'

Do you see the similarities in the two passages of Isaiah and Luke of the reference to the throne of David, that the government will be on His shoulders, as Isaiah said, that His kingdom will never end, as Isaiah was referring to as well. There are these echoes between the passages because God and Jesus fulfilled His promise but you know, for us, it's old news. Do we want to have a competition of who gets the most Christmases underneath their belt? Because I want you to put your hand up on that one, because it's for us, it almost just washes over us, that I've heard this so often, Jesus is the answer but when we allow it to wash over us, when we lose the wonder of Advent, we lose the hope of Advent as well, the hope and the good news that God would want to give us in this season as we draw to the close of another year. Because, if Jesus is the fulfillment

of the promise of Isaiah, and if that God held true to that promise, then He's also able to fulfill the other promises of Jesus.

There are the promises concerning His titles. There are promises and testimony of scripture that, for example in the New Testament we read that Jesus is alive even now that He reigns at the Father's side, and that you and I can know Him. Jesus is not just an idea and He's not just a moral figure to try and emulate. If God fulfilled this promise and this testimony about Jesus then every other promise is true as well, and so that means you can know Him right here now in your life and you can be sharing testimony like Sharon did.

Because Jesus can be an active part of your life and He can bring light into your darkness, the darkness you may be experiencing even today. that is the hope and offer we're reminded of in our verses today and, if it's true that Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise made, and if that means that the rest of what we read about Jesus is true, that we can cling to that in faith, then what do the titles of Jesus mean? What does it mean that he's a Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace? What do those mean? Because, again, we just gloss over them, we just skip over them so easily. 'Oh I've heard those before?' but, actually, there's so much depth in them, so much life in them, and so, each week, starting today, we're going to look at one of them, and today's is Wonderful Counselor.

I've already shared about what the meaning of Wonderful means, that it's something that only God can do, that's beyond mere human ability, and Counselor has connotations of someone who is an advisor, who gives wise advice and direction, of how to order or govern our lives, both individually and collectively, we might describe it as 'extraordinary wisdom' and don't we see that in the life of Jesus when we read through the gospels? For example, there's that point when he's 12 years old and He's in the temple and He's engaging with the teachers and He's asking questions and they're asking questions, He's giving answers and then we read that 'Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.' Extraordinary wisdom from the youngest of age. But as He grows up and He begins His ministry, one of the things that really struck the people was how He taught, that He taught as someone who had authority, that He spoke with deep knowledge and certainty about the things of God and the things of the kingdom, He spoke with certainty, with authority about how to live life, about how life was structured to be lived the best way, and He could give direction on that. He could give direction that would lead to life and people remarked on that. They noticed that and those that heeded it found that true life, life and all its fullness but you know He's still offering it even today. He's still offering that life-giving wisdom even today, to you and I, but we easily, so easily, too easily turn away from them and go our own way.

Back in Isaiah's day the people had done very similarly. We read just at that end verse at the end of chapter 8 where they're in darkness. Well, just a few verses before that one, we also read this 'When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists, whose whisper and mutter, should not our people inquire of their God, why consult the

dead on behalf of the living, consult God's' instruction and the testimony of warning the people were turning to other sources of wisdom. And now, we might not be turning to mediums and spiritus, although some in our community do, but we easily turn to other sources of wisdom. We say 'Well, these are just old words or these words are too difficult?' or 'I just want to pursue what I think is right and what I think is wise.' and our culture just reinforces that message, reinforces 'Just live your own story. Live your own way. Allow no one or nothing to restrict or confine your life, because that's not true life, that's not true freedom. Do not allow yourself to be governed' Is the message of our culture. But how we just get ourselves into a mess when we do that and actually we need the wisdom of God and so we find repeated encouragements in the scriptures to turn to God's word, to find life as the one verse here reminds us that His word revives us and we heard that with Sharon's testimony today of how God spoke through that verse that someone shared with her and brought life brought encouragement, sustained her when she wasn't sure what the future held and it gave her such confidence and peace. And so, maybe the invitation this Advent is not only to realize that the promise of Jesus is true and fulfilled and that you can know Him but to let Him in by opening up His word again, to get into a habit, our pattern, our rhythm of being in His word. Now, if you need some help with that then we do order regularly printed copies of daily reading notes and we can get you a physical copy of that of Every day with Jesus or Daily Bread and I'm sure they're probably just about to begin an Advent series and that might be how you just dig in for maybe 10 minutes at the start of your day or maybe the end of your day and you allow God to speak His wisdom into your life, or if you've got a smartphone or a tablet or such like, you could get the Bible app and one of the reading plans there or you could get the Lectio 365 app which I've gone on about multiple times, but I really do go on about it because I think it weaves together scripture and prayer so well. We need to be a people who allow the wisdom of God, to be nurtured in us, spoken to us, and the only way to receive that is to be in His word because when we're in that place of being in His word and being in prayer and we set good rhythms, then God is faithful.

And so just a couple of weeks ago I was on retreat and I have a rhythm of trying to go three or four times a year to the Bield up near Perth and go and retreat just to get some time away because, well, no one's preaching to me, so I just need to make sure that I have some space and time where God meets with me and I receive from Him and that particular week I'd gone feeling a bit bruised. I'd received some harsh criticism and it had bruised me and so I went just needing something from God, to hear from Him, to meet with Him and, as I do at the start of every day of retreat, I take some time in prayer and in journaling and I write down what I need from God that day whether it's direction or a revelation or a word of encouragement or comfort, whatever it might be, and that's a practice I've picked up from the writings of others and in that day God spoke, so much actually, that I left feeling encouraged and strengthened with light for the next part of the journey and ready to come back and to serve and to minister in His name. God was faithful, He spoke wisdom into that time with Him that when we create space for Him to speak He does and so maybe the invitation this Christmas is to begin to become reacquainted with the Wonderful Counselor by being in His , by being in the place of prayer and allow Him to speak His life-giving wisdom into your life rather than just trying

to go at your own and rely on your own wisdom to govern your life as how you think best and, instead, let Him begin to govern your life by His word.

In Sharon's testimony as well this morning the council of friends was really helpful and often when we think of who do you go to for advice we probably end up thinking well I'll speak to my friends you might also say you'd speak to a spouse or a partner or maybe a parent but again you'd probably do that because they're your friend. How many of a spouse would say 'Well, they're my best friend' so even if it is a spouse, a partner or a parent it's often because you've developed a degree of friendship with them and so I've been thinking in my preparation can we understand the counsel of Jesus in terms of His friendship and actually I think we can because the word Counselor also has connotations of someone who gives comfort of someone, who draws alongside us, who journeys with us and we see that in the gospels of Jesus that He was often called a friend of tax collectors and sinners, He welcomed them, He spent time with them, He counseled them about how to live but He was , He journeyed with them, with people whose lives were messy, broken, maybe dark, and I was reading around the same time a chapter from a book that I've referred to you before Gentle and Lowly and if you've not got a copy I do encourage you to get one because it's such a wonderful book just sot brings out the heart of Jesus to us and in that particular chapter on the friendship of Jesus. The author builds his case over the chapter speaking of how Jesus is our companion and friend and he reaches this conclusion near the end he says 'Christ's heart for us means that He will know, He will be our never-failing friend, He offers us a friendship that gets underneath the pain' He offers us a friendship that gets underneath the pain - can you imagine a friend like that? Do you need a friend like that? Who knows the depths of your soul? Who knows the heart and the pain, the doubt and the dismay, that's there and who is present there with you as you face that? Because that is the heart of Jesus for us. He proved it two thousand years ago that rather than stay in the glory of heaven He came in human form, born into squalor and experienced the hardest of lives, experienced everything that we might be able to experience, He held nothing back but entered into the pain and brokenness of our world and maybe what you need to know is that is who Jesus is and He's there with you this Advent season. He is the Wonderful Counselor who offers life-giving wisdom and companionship because sometimes the best counsel is not a whole lot of words but just someone's presence and maybe you just need to know the presence of Jesus with you this Advent. That His presence can be that light that sees you through the dark times and into a new day, a new day of hope and of joy and of peace, but in the time between now and then that He journeys with you. He's that faithful companion. He will never leave you nor forsake you and He offers you light for your path.

If you're experiencing darkness, it is real and there's no need to deny it, but it doesn't have to be the only reality in your life. Jesus can also be there. He can be that companion, that Wonderful Counselor, and so He can then reshape life and reshape your reality.

So, why not this Advent let Jesus in. Get into His word. Spend time with Him in prayer, for He is the Wonderful Counselor.

May it be so Amen

We close our service as we sing together our final hymn another traditional advent hymn calling upon Jesus to come into our lives to come into our world afresh as we journey towards Christmas we sing together 'Come thou long expected Jesus'.