

**Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> December 2021**  
**Isaiah 9:6-7 & John 14:1, 7-11, 18-23**  
**Rev.Scott Burton**  
**Brightons Parish Church**

Please do be seated.

Let us take a moment to pray before we think about God's word.

Holy Spirit, come among us please and reveal to us the heart of our Father.

Come Holy Spirit and help us see the hope we have through Jesus.

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

It's only nine days to go, nine days to go, and before you start worrying, I'm not talking about Christmas, you've got an extra four days on top of that. It's not nine days to go either to the arrival of the little one, hopefully, we'll see although, it could be. No, it's nine days until the shortest day of the year, Did you know that? The 21st of December is the day when we will have the least amount of light in the day, which means in 10 days' time the days start getting longer, the light starts increasing and strangely, for some reason, as I get older, this becomes a bigger deal, just to get through the winter and get to that point where I know, just mentally, the days are getting longer, the summer is coming, light is coming, and I hope, as we've journeyed through this Advent series, maybe it has been a bit of a turning point for you, a bit like knowing this - there's a light on the horizon.

Because this year has been hard and it continues to be hard, and so, we've spoken about the kinds of darkness that we can experience, the circumstances around us are, in personal life that can bring a measure of darkness to our lives. Yet I'm conscious that there's an area of darkness in our lives which is not related to the circumstances beyond our control. Sometimes we face darkness in our lives because of choices we make, actions we take and, let's be honest, that affects every one of us, affects you and it affects me. Words said, actions taken, maybe public, maybe private, and every one of us will be able to name something this past year which maybe lingers at the back of our minds and we wish we'd done things differently. There may be something we didn't do and maybe that haunts us as well. And so, in the face of that kind of darkness does, does the Advent message say anything? Does the Advent message have anything of good news to say to us? And well, we read earlier 'For to us a child is born and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace' and we've seen that Jesus fulfills those first two titles so well yet, in the case of Mighty God especially, so surprisingly.

So, what does it mean that Jesus is Everlasting Father? Because, if we're honest, as Christians, we hear this and we're like 'I'm a bit confused! Isn't Jesus the Son of God so how can He be Everlasting Father? It just doesn't seem to make sense/' And so, before we get into Jesus in the New Testament let's pause that thought and take a kind of backward step into the Old Testament and think what that reveals that would have brought light in the darkness for the people of Isaiah's day/ Because, in the Old Testament, there are so many references to a kind of father-son relationship or to the Father-heart of God. And so, in Hosea we read 'When Israel was a child I loved him and out of Egypt I called my son.' And so, God speaks of His relationship with His people and a father-child, a father-son relationship and He treats them in that way, He loves

them and so He rescued His son from Egypt, from slavery, and brought them into the promised land. That's what Isaiah is recalling here.

But there are also scriptures that speak of the Father-heart of God and how He relates to His people.

So, in the Psalms we read 'As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him for he knows how we are formed he remembers that we are dust.' The Father treats us, relates to us, as this father, this is how God relates to His people, as one with compassion. And let's remember, compassion is not just mere pity, compassion is an emotion that's deep in the bowels of your being, and it compels you to action. That is the compassion of scripture and that is how God feels towards His people, and then He treats them with understanding and with gentleness. He knows that we are but dust. This is how the Father-heart of God is portrayed in the scriptures or in another Psalm we realize we have God being a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, He stands beside those who might be on the fringes and more vulnerable, the more needy in society. And so, he instituted laws in the time of His people to care for them, to make sure that they weren't taken advantage of, they weren't neglected, they weren't left destitute. The Father-heart of God sought to protect and to care for His people across all of society. And so, when Isaiah speaks of the Everlasting Father, this father across the generations, the people would have recalled these kind of scriptures, they would have recalled this about God and it would have lightened the soul, it would have brought good news in the darkness, to hear again of the Father-heart of God. And so, before we move into the New Testament and look at this in reference to Jesus, can I ask you of this - What shapes your understanding of the father-heart of God? What shapes your understanding of the father-heart of God?

Is it your own experience? Your own father who might have been absent for any number of different reasons? Who might have been overly harsh or angry or was just a disciplinarian type of father, maybe inherited that from his own father? What is it that shapes your perception of the father-heart of God?

And maybe the invitation this Advent, this week of Advent, is for you to allow scripture to speak more loudly. If that be the case to allow scripture to help you see the father-heart of God as it truly is, rather than it be shaped by another experience and by another voice. Allow God's word to shape your perception of the father-heart of God. Because, one day, an individual did come speaking and teaching about the father-heart of God and He fulfilled these promises of Isaiah and in His ministry, He spoke with such authority and intimacy about the Father and time and time again He displayed the father-heart of God and it was, of course Jesus, and what He said. And then though once again confounding people just like last week's message, it confounded people, it startled people because the Jews had been taught there's one God, there's only one God in all the universe, and He alone is worthy and He's not found in any image or person, so worship Him alone. And so, Jesus comes and He starts teaching and starts modeling something and He brings the next phase of revelation about God to build upon what had been there in the Old Testament and what had been hinted at in the Old

Testament but He brought the next phase of revelation and people found it hard to take on board, and so we read earlier 'Philip said 'Lord show us the Father and that'll be enough for us.'" Like 'Good Sunday School answer Philip, great, you've got that heart. Fantastic, well done, gold star' big tick!' But then Jesus says 'Don't you know me, Philip? Even after I've been among you such a long time. Anyone who's seen me has seen the Father. How could you say 'show us the father? Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves.' And you can kind of now appreciate why Philip and the other disciples are finding it hard to get their head around this because, in effect, Jesus is saying 'I'm God, The Father's God. We're distinct persons but we're both God.' Like 'What?' And then later on with the teaching about the Holy Spirit and then with the coming of the Holy Spirit we see that the Holy Spirit is also God but the Holy Spirit is not the Father or the Son either, and so what we end up having is what we now call the Trinity. It's not a word found in the Bible but it's a helpful title phrase that just recalls this teaching, that in Christianity, we understand Jesus to have shown us that there is one God but there are three persons and each person is fully God but there's still only one God. And, in case you're struggling to get your head around that, so has the church for 2000 years, so you're not alone. Okay? And every analogy we try and use to get our heads around this falls down in some way. Whether you want to talk about water or clover leaves or eggs or whatever, none of them are perfect and in case you think also that 'What's the point of this? What has this got to do with anything? Is this just some nice pie in the sky theological nonsense?' I was reading in Wayne Grudem's bible doctrine and preparation for today and he gives six reasons why the Trinity is important Doctrine because he says 'From this we're then confident about:

Being made right with God

We can know we are justified by faith rather than by having to try and earn it

We can worship Jesus as God and not commit idolatry

We can know we're saved by grace rather than by any other means

We can be truly know that God is a personal God

And that there is in fact unity to the universe.

I would never have come up with all those without his help and I'm not going to go into all the detail of all these. If you want to know more, I'll lend you the book, but you can see that a lot hinges on the Trinity, on this revelation that there's one God but there's three persons, and actually the church has got itself into such a mess when we've ignored this, shelved this, or tried to go too far with this, and break it down into something we can try and understand.

And, by the way, just as a little aside, I'm sure you're conscious of in our community or different communities, you'll be conscious of folks like Jehovah's witnesses or Mormons, The Church of the Latter's Day Saints. These two organizations are not Christian by the way, if you didn't know, because they deny the Trinity and by denying the Trinity they make Jesus to be a separate God, from the Father and the rest of this falls down because neither organization teaches salvation by faith and grace alone, so they're not Christian. That doesn't mean you should shun them or be nasty to them, but it's just knowing where the lines are. They're not Christian and just if they come knocking at

your door or chatting to it and they are trying to change your mind, don't let them, because the script, even if they say they're using the Bible, it's often the Bible in their theology or in the case of Jehovah's witnesses the Bible wrongly translated, to support their case. So, just that wee aside on.

Okay, because what's of relevance for us today really, is this point, that when you see Jesus you see the heart of the Father. Hebrews says 'The Son is the radiance of God's glory.' when you see Jesus you don't see the Father, but you see the heart of the Father, the Father's heart shines through everything Jesus says and does. So if you were to try and think through some of the Gospel stories the accounts of Jesus life and ministry - What is it that you see there of the father-heart of God? What stories come to mind? What do you see through the life and ministry, the death and resurrection of Jesus? What do you see of the father-heart of God shining through?

To give you something concrete to take away and to have us on a similar page today at least, I went back to the three main passages I've referred to today Isaiah, John and also Hosea, to say 'What did these teach us about the father-heart of God?' And I've got four words which I'll speak on very briefly.

Passionate, Present, Retaining and Restoring.

And so, in Isaiah we read those great promises that a child would come and he'd be called Everlasting Father and the government would be in his shoulders and there'd be a great work done and there'd be great hope through this child. But what instigates it, what drives it, what underpins everything is the zeal of the Lord Almighty. And you may just have skipped over that. 'Well that's a nice wee thought.' but not really giving it much attention. But the zeal of the Lord Almighty speaks of the passionate commitment of God, the passionate love of God, and it's there in that scripture that we so often refer to but again just skip over that 'God so loved the world that he gave his only son.' That God so loved you that he sent His Son as a babe at Christmas, that is how much God loves you that He is committed to you passionately with a zealous kind of love, that is the love God has for you. So, whatever this year has brought for you and the darkness you may be facing maybe even because of your own choices don't doubt this - God passionately loves you - don't doubt it!

And out of that love He's also present. As I spoke of the people rejoicing before God, they're in the presence of God, Jesus spoke of not leaving the disciples as orphans, that He would come to them, that the Father and He would make His, their home with His people. He's present, He's the present, He's with us, He's near us and so, we see it in the Christmas story that not only does the Father's love cause the Son to come into the world but by coming into the world as a babe into our darkness and brokenness even into the sin and the mess we make of life, He draws near, He shows that He is present even now, even with all the choices you've made, He is present to you. Don't doubt that either. And because He's passionate and He's present, He's going to do a couple of things and the first is, He's going to retain, He's going to hold on. We read earlier from Hosea at the beginning of chapter 11. but just a few verses later we hear of God

speaking to Israel again and saying 'How can I give you up Ephraim or Israel? How can I hand you over? My heart is changed within me. All my compassion has aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger now.' To give you some background to the book of Isaiah, Hosea, his ministry and both his life are a picture of the unfaithfulness of God's people towards God and so he comes with a message about that but actually in his life you see it as well because Hosea is married to a prostitute and she is unfaithful to him, she commits infidelity and it's meant to be a picture of God and His people, that His people have been unfaithful to Him and so, imagine that pain, imagine that betrayal, imagine what that would feel like, and still saying 'How can I give you up? That my compassion, the depth of emotion I feel in my being, causes me into action to hold on to you my people, to retain you, no matter what you've done, no matter the darkness you may feel because of choices made this year, I will hold on to you, I will retain you. Such is my love.; And I'm getting so much out of this book Gentle and Lowly just now. I wonder if George drew upon this in some of his prayer - I'll need to check with him later- but a couple of weeks ago I was reading from this book and the author quotes John Bunyan who wrote, I think it was about the 18th century or so, and John Bunyan draws upon one verse of scripture and I think he writes a whole book about one verse of scripture as the puritans often did, and the verse is in John as well and it's where Jesus said 'All that the Father gives me will come to me and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.' and John Bunyan imagines a conversation between humanity or individuals with Jesus and here's what he writes:

But I am a great sinner you say. I will never cast you out says Christ.  
But I am an old sinner you say. I will never cast you out says Christ.  
I'm a hard-hearted sinner you say. I will never cast you out says Jesus.  
I am a backsliding sinner you say. I will never cast you out says Jesus.  
But I've sinned against light and mercy you say. I will never cast you out says Jesus.  
But I have no good thing to bring with me you say. I will never cast you out says Jesus.

In the darkness you might be facing because of choices made never doubt His hold on you, His love, His presence compel Him to hold on to you fast, to retain you such, so precious are you to Him, He is a father who holds you fast whatever the darkness, whatever the choice.

But He is a good father that He doesn't just hold you fast, He wants something else for you. His passionate love and presence compel Him to something else. He compelled Him to restore you. Isaiah said 'You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy.' and those words enlarged and increased are restoring words. That the people are facing gloom and darkness, they're facing persecution, the nation is on the decline, there's death and destruction, but God is going to restore, He's going to grow the nation again, He's going to bring a better future for them so their joy will increase. Where there is fear and gloom, this promise is a promise of restoration. That the Lord hasn't given up on His people, that He wants a better future for His people and He wants a better future for you, whatever the darkness has brought this year. In the darkness of your own choices know this - you can never fully plumb the depths of the Father's heart for you, His love for you, His love shown through Jesus coming as a babe, dying on a cross.

You can never plumb the depths of it and so He accepts you as you are, but He will not leave you there, He wants to take you on a journey of restoration, He wants to take you on a journey of restoration and so today, you might be feeling in the darkest of winter, you might be feeling that the road ahead just looks bleak and dark and lonely, because of this year, because of your choices, but know this - there's a corner ahead, there can be light ahead, if you will receive the father-heart of God for you today, and in the days ahead, So will you this Advent receive Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Will you let Him in that you might turn that corner, that you might receive His light and that He might then lead you on that journey of restoration?

I really pray that you will let Him in and so let us take a moment now to pray. Let us pray.

So, as you cast your mind over the year - Where do you need the father-heart of God?

Is it to know that He's not abandoned you? That He's passionately committed to you? That he's present, he's holding on, that he'll restore?

In the stillness why not invite Him into that darkness. It might not be wrong choices. It might be something else.

But welcome him in. Welcome Him in,

If there have been wrong choices, take the time now to name them before Him and to ask for his forgiveness.

We've all done it, we've all been there.

Father God, thank-you for revealing the depths of Your heart through Jesus, for making that tangible. Sometimes we can just turn You into ideas, or have a picture of You as very distant, but you break through all that. Through Jesus, You show what Your heart's really like, Your passionate commitment, Your presence in the darkness, Your heart to hold us fast, never cast us out and to restore us, that there's a better day ahead, a better future. Thank-you Father.

And where we do need forgiveness, may that grace just be poured out now, may we receive that and it might not fix the problems, but at least we're right with You.

As we say to You, we trust You, we cling to You we ask you, to lead us on. Lead us on Father, for You are good, You're compassionate, You're wholly trustworthy,

So, receive our thanks and praise in Jesus name. Amen.

We close our service as we sing together Advent hymn it's it might be an odd one to finish on but in the words of the hymn and some of the verses I've picked the organ is misbehaving itself that's not jill so um in the verses I've picked and the verses are

picked the there's some reference to the difficulties we can go through and the love of that's portrayed in the hymn of Father God so let's stand to sing Once in Royal David's City.